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in Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural
Activities**

Final Thesis

**The Decolonisation of the Museum
Centring Afro-Italian Presence in the Italian
Art System**

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this thesis stems from a broader consideration of Italy's multi-ethnicity. Even though the social fabric of the country is characterised by the presence of several ethnic communities, in many fields the country seems not to reflect this multiculturalism; one of these is the cultural one. If one thinks of Italian contemporary art promoted by museums or other institutions, one almost never sees Italian artists with foreign origins represented in exhibitions and events, and yet, Italy has been living in multiculturalism for many years now.

Afro-descendant community is certainly one of the most numerous in Italy, so it was interesting to analyse its artistic community and its level of presence in the Italian art system to understand in which circuits they are present and the type of artistic production they offer. In particular, the focus is on the representation of Afro-descendant artists in contemporary art museum institutions as they are the most visible showcase for artists therefore, analysing the presence of Afro-Italian artists in these institutions can be indicative of their level of inclusion. Moreover, considering that the museum over the years has transformed itself into a space not just for exhibition but also into an interpretative system of the present, responding to the ethical and social needs of its time, it was interesting to analyse this issue of inclusion, which seems to pose a problem for the museum institution, evidently not yet able to meet this challenge of the present.

The first chapter opens with a reflection on the fact that museums, as we know them today, have gone through a long process of changes to achieve their current role of mouthpiece for social issues. Starting in the 1960s, critics and especially artists began to challenge art institutions emphasising their elitist nature and discriminant systems, inaugurating the period of the so-called Institutional Critique. Examples of this stance were the artists Daniel Buren and his huge piece of striped fabric hanging in the centre of the Solomon R. Guggenheim in 1971, or Hans Haacke and its *MoMA Poll* installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. Both interventions aimed to reflect on the fact that art institutions were neither democratic nor neutral

spaces¹. During the 1980's the debate continued with a new phase of the Institutional Critique, the New Museology. Peter Vergo, one of the proponents of New Museology, along with other scholars, was concerned that museums were concentrating too much on problems of method rather than focusing on purposes, at the risk of losing sight of the numerous objectives of institutions such as preservation, research, display, education. Simultaneously artists continued to criticise certain dynamics of art institutions like the Guerilla Girls collective, which brought to light the issue of gender inclusivity and equality in institutions. From the mid 1990s to the early 2000s, New Institutionalism continued on the path of transforming museums into more democratic and egalitarian spaces through the exploration of new curatorial approaches and a reflection on the importance of the audience involvement. Despite this long period of critical stance, museums still face some challenges. One of particular importance, which has become central in the debate in recent years, is the need to decolonise art institutions, which still suffer from the legacy of colonialism survived in an ethnocentric and Eurocentric view of culture.

The debate on decolonization in the museum sector is particularly urgent as it is not yet sufficiently addressed and the struggle to approach this subject is understandable when looking back at Italian colonial history.

The Italian colonial adventure in the African continent contributed to the process of creating an Italian identity. It was especially during fascism that the idea of the construction of national identity took centre stage in the regime's propaganda. The Italic race had to be protected from the threat of *meticciato* that would contaminate the purity of Italians, a sense of rejection and disdain for colonised African populations, considered savage and biologically inferior, was thus established. In this definition process of the Italians, skin colour was almost never mentioned; this was because the whiteness of Italians was considered an implicit characteristic, while it was necessary

¹ Buren's work was intended to emphasise the distraction caused by the museum's architecture, which tended to overshadow the works of art on display. For this reason, Buren created a huge piece of striped fabric hanging in the centre of the Guggenheim that would distract visitors from the structure of the building, making his work independent of the museum space. This radical intervention was seen as a threat to the centrality of minimalism, which was the leading art movement in the United States at the time. Eventually, Buren's work was withdrawn from the exhibition with the justification that his work overshadowed the works of other artists. Hans Haacke's provocation was instead more political. His installation aimed to make viewers reflect on the non-neutrality of institutional spaces by pointing out that New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a member of MoMA's administration and running for re-election in 1970, had not denounced President Nixon's controversial Indochina policy.

to emphasise the blackness of the colonised to demonstrate their clear difference and therefore inferiority. After World War II, when Italy lost the war and also the colonies, the country went through a process of self-absolution with respect to the brutalities committed in the colonies, because the colonial experience was seen as a direct product of the fascist regime, a difficult moment in Italian history that Italians wanted to leave behind after the war. This resulted in a lack of debate over the years on Italian responsibilities in the colonial venture, fostering the myth of *Italiani brava gente* and the idea of a limited and less detrimental colonialism compared to other European experiences. This unquestioned past has left traces in the present in the urban space for instance, full of testimonies of colonialism such as monuments or street names celebrating people who helped build the Italian empire, but also in the stereotypical perception we have of the 'Other' and in particular of Afro-descendant people given the important colonial campaign in the African continent.

The cultural system is also contaminated by these traces of colonialism, just think of the collections of ethnographic museums, which are the result of the looting and accumulation of artefacts from non-European worlds. These controversial collections are now more than ever at the centre of a debate calling for the return of the objects in the collections to their rightful owners. In this sense, ethnographic museums could be a good starting point for decolonisation in Italy, where only a few institutions, including the Museo Pigorini, the Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAET), have recently started to question their collections and put into practice virtuous decolonisation practices that could also be an inspiration for contemporary art museums and the art system in general².

The second chapter enters more in the focus of the dissertation which is the presence of Afro-descendant artists in museums and in the art system.

² The Museo Pigorini and the Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi are part of a larger museum complex called the Museum of Civilisations (Muciv) in Rome. The Pigorini museum started in 2019 with some decolonisation practices thanks to a collaboration with an artist and photographer of Congolese origin who, starting from the museum's artefacts, promoted research through his work to explore the current relationship between the West and Africa. A similar work is being carried out by the Museo Italo Africano, which since 2020 has set itself the goal of telling the public about the controversial relationship between Italy and Africa with the collaboration of artists and researchers from the countries that underwent Italian colonisation contributing to the narration of a non-ethnocentric version of Italian colonial history. Finally, the MAET in Turin has been promoting projects since 2008 that involve the participation of the city's diasporic communities as cultural mediators to help the public read the ethnographic collection from a different perspective.

Initially, the topic is approached from the perspective of the United States, starting in the 20th century and analysing the evolution of the African American presence in some US museums. The case of the United States was chosen as it is commonly a point of reference when it comes to issues of inclusivity and representation of Afro-descendants in society; partly because of the large Afro-descendant community that the country has and, of course, because of the historical events that have seen the Afro-American community play a prominent role in the history of the United States of America. During the process of emancipation of African Americans throughout the 20th century, art represented a means for black people to make their voices heard. Especially after the civil rights movement, black artists started to be considered for exhibitions in contemporary art institutions, whereas previously very few exhibitions featured them. Some significant but controversial exhibitions were organized such as *Harlem on my Mind* at the Metropolitan Museum in 1969 and *Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971.

In parallel, black artists were creating exhibitions in response to the institutional negligence that black art community was experiencing. This was the situation in the last century; today, some analyses show that there have been many changes in terms of the representation and inclusion of African American artists in art institutions, yet the difference with their white colleagues is still there.

The recent police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and the subsequent protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement have reignited the debate on the responsibility of US art museum towards inclusivity and equal ethnic representation in institutions, but the process of integration still has a long way to go. Indeed, the United States institutions must continue to work on building programmes to consistently exhibit African American artists and include them in their collections as an indispensable part of its cultural heritage on an equal footing with white artists.

The event of George Floyd's death has shaken not only the United States but the whole world, including Italy, which has shown solidarity with the cause supported by Black Lives Matter through numerous protests across the country. This mobilisation appeared hypocritical as the same solidarity has never been shown for the struggles of the Afro-Italian community. This is due to a deep-rooted problem in the country regarding the perception of blackness as an alien condition. Because blackness is

perceived as something that does not naturally belong to the country, there is not even a full awareness of the existence of an Italian black community. The experience of the colonies in Africa and the politics of the fascist era contributed to the construction of an Italianity based on the exclusion and racialisation of the black community. Today we must come to terms with this anachronistic idea of Italian identity. The representation of black people through the media has not helped to improve their perception in society. Over the years, cinema and television have contributed to a stereotyped and distorted view of black people who tend to be seen more as a threat than as an integral part of Italian society.

This exclusion from society is also facilitated by the obsolete citizenship law, the *ius sanguinis*, which grants Italian citizenship to those born of at least one Italian parent. This law therefore denies the possibility of being considered Italian to, for example, the so-called second generations, i.e., those people born growing up in Italy but of immigrant parents. The Italian law in this sense seems to reduce citizenship to a matter of blood but also of merit, as in the case of the two children of Egyptian origin, Adam El Hamami and Ramy Shehata, who were granted citizenship in 2019 after making a heroic gesture that saved their classmates from a dangerous circumstance.

In a country where most of the population is white, a law such as *ius sanguinis* raises barriers to the ‘Other’ more each day. In 2017, a draft citizenship reform was introduced; the proposal would have allowed children born in Italy to foreign parents, but with at least one parent holding a residence permit, to obtain citizenship. It was therefore a kind of *ius soli* which, however, did not create an automatism between citizenship and birth on Italian territory but at least granted the possibility of acquiring citizenship through an act of will of the parent. Eventually the reform was not approved, and this fact contributed to digging the abyss of division ever deeper³.

The Black Lives Matter demonstrations have contributed, albeit minimally, to highlight the marginality of Afro-Italians in society and also in the Italian art system. This is crucial because the Afro-Italian community is very active in the artistic field: literature, music, cinema, fashion⁴. The problem is that despite the artistic agitation

³ N. Uyangoda, *L'unica persona nera nella stanza*, Roma: 66thand2nd, 2021, pp. 74-83.

⁴ Some virtuous examples are, for instance, the NoOx Worldwide record company that supports emerging Afro-Italians musicians or the writers Igiaba Scego, Abdou Mbacke Diouf, Espérance Hakuzwimana to name but a few, who are helping to enrich the Italian literary scene.

that exists, Afro-Italian artistic products remain marginal because they are not supported and represented in the Italian cultural system and often remain within a circuit of self-organised spaces. This also applies to visual artists, which is why it was interesting to investigate the level of their representation in the Italian art system.

The last section of chapter two focuses on presenting some cases of Italian contemporary art museums, exhibitions and cultural projects that have included Afro-Italian artists in their programming. The research conducted was aimed at understanding the current level of representation and inclusion of Afro-Italian visual artists especially in contemporary art museums. However, it was also necessary to research the representation of these artists outside the institutional space, as this is precisely the circuit where they are most present.

The third chapter is dedicated to illustrating the artistic production of three Afro-Italian artists Victor Fotso Nyie (Italo-Cameroonian), Binta Diaw (Italo-Senegalese) and Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti (Italo-Congolese). The aim of the chapter was to analyse their artistic path in depth to see through which channels they have been represented and exhibited throughout their careers, as well as to explore the themes addressed in their works. They were selected because they worked mainly in Italy, so they were suitable for the focus of the thesis and also for the undersigned personal taste in their artistic production. In addition, it must also be said that the selection was made on a limited choice of artists as few names of Afro-Italian artists emerged from the research carried out. This aspect is very telling as well about the low visibility of these artists in the Italian art system.

The research methodology for this section consisted of finding information on the exhibitions and projects of the three artists online; where it was not possible to find specific information on works or exhibitions, the undersigned had direct contact with the artists. The chapter concludes with an interview with the artists conducted by the undersigned, where they gave their personal experience and point of view on the central issue addressed in this thesis, namely the representation of Afro-descendant artists in the Italian art system.

The final objective of this research was therefore to first understand the level of representation of Afro-descendant visual artists in the Italian art system, with a focus on contemporary art institutions, and then to highlight the problem of their low

visibility and representation in the cultural system. The problem in the country is still poorly addressed and this is also related to colonialist dynamics which survived in the present, hence the urgency to begin a process of decolonisation within museums and in the world of culture in general to guarantee equal opportunities for all.

CHAPTER 1 – Decolonisation of the art institution: a look into the past to understand the present

1.1 Challenging the art institution: towards a democratization of the art

1.1.1 Contesting the museum: from the Institutional Critique to the New Institutionalism

To what extent contemporary museums are representative systems of the present and its social and ethical demands?

Nowadays, art institutions are considered receptive spaces for the demands of our society especially towards subject matters like inclusivity, equal representation, and social inequality. To achieve this result, the museum went through a long process of changes to reach the role of mouthpiece for societal issues.

In the period that goes from the late 1960s to the early 1970s art institutions experienced the first phase of the so-called Institutional Critique, a period of provocative artistic practices implemented to question the art institutions like museums and art galleries. Already in the early 1960s critics such as Arthur C. Danto⁵ began to highlight the existence of an art system characterized by a privileged social group who establish the artistic canons and at the same time is the only consumer of these canons. Besides the theoretical contributions, it was especially the artists who concretely challenged institutions underlining their elitist nature and discriminant systems.

The French artist Daniel Buren whose artistic production has been characterised by the use of striped fabrics paintings as his trademark, was invited in 1971 at the *Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition* in New York. His contribution was a huge piece of striped fabric hanging in the centre of the museum, which was removed before the show's opening without the artist's consent⁶. Before this decision, Guggenheim administrators had tried to ask the artist for a modification of his installation, but he refused this proposal and therefore Guggenheim decided to censor his work. The

⁵ A. C. Danto, *The artworld*, in "The journal of philosophy", vol. 61, n.19, 15 October 1964, pp. 571-584.

⁶ A. Alberro, *The Turn of the Screw: Daniel Buren, Dan Flavin, and the Sixht Guggenheim International Exhibition*, October vol. 80, The MIT Press, 1997, pp.57-84, here pp. 57-59.

museum declared that the reason for the elimination of Buren's installation was because of the artwork interfering with the space of the museum and with the work of other artists in the exhibition. However, this was a very weak justification considering that of the twenty-one artists participating in the exhibition, sixteen of them signed a petition to express their disapproval of the censorship of Buren's work and one of them, Carl Andre, even withdrew his work from the show. Only the other five artists complained that Buren's installation overshadowed their works⁷.



Figure 1, Daniel Buren, Untitled, 1971, acrylic paint on cotton fabric, 20 x10 m, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The Guggenheim International series have always focused, since its inception in 1956, on representing the best contemporary avant-garde trends of the time from around the world. The first editions of these international exhibitions also provided a prize of 10,000 dollars for the best featured work. This International Award was so favourably supported by the government that President Eisenhower decided in 1956 to hold the award presentation at the White House on an ongoing basis. The presence of this award helped transform the series into a very prestigious and globally recognised event, as

⁷Ibid., here p. 68-69.

well as promoting the image of the United States as a point of reference for high culture and advanced art. Over the years the format of these exhibitions changed but the ambition to show the best of contemporary avant-garde art remained in the edition of 1971 too. However, differently from previous Internationals, that sixth edition was dominated by U.S artists; the justification for this was that the artistic production of U.S artists in the later 1960s had been pivotal to the continuation of avant-gardes worldwide; in particular, it was emphasised the fundamental role of Minimalism, a New-York based art movement, in shaping the other avant-garde trends of the time⁸. It is interesting to note that the five artists who complained about Buren's work were Americans and artists of the Minimalism movement. Besides this, none of the artists who accused Buren (W. De Maria, J. Kosuth, D. Judd, D. Flavin and M. Heizer) had a valid reason to claim that their works were overshadowed by Buren's installation. The case of the artist Michael Heizer and his work *Actual Size* (1971) is sufficient to illustrate this point. His installation was a photographic work that was projected onto the walls of the museum. In order to display his installation properly, the museum dedicated to him an enclosed and darkened room which was completely isolated from the space occupied by Buren's installation. The only one who might have had a plausible complaint was Dan Flavin whose untitled installation was a site-specific system of thirty-two fluorescent lights illuminating different spaces in the museum. Buren's banner, suspended in the middle of the building, could obscure some parts of the walls illuminated by Flavin's work, but it is also true that his installation, which emanated coloured lights in a rather large area, could affect its surroundings including Buren's installation. It is therefore clear that the reason for the opposition to his artwork was not a matter of interference with the other works in the exhibition⁹. When Buren conceived the idea of his banner to hang in the centre of the building, he was well aware of the distracting architecture of the museum which tended to reduce what is in the exhibition space almost to a simple decorative object while the architectural structure is the real attraction. The proposal to install it in the centre of the Guggenheim would have continually caught the viewer's eye, distracting attention from the structure of the building, making his work independent of the museum space.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 63-65.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 72-75.

Buren's installation was therefore a provocation and a critique that revealed the inadequacy of the site-specific works of his opponents, who were not overshadowed by his work but rather by the architectural space of the museum. According to Alberro, it was precisely the realisation of the inadequacy of their works in relation to the spectacular architecture of the Guggenheim that led the five artists to an accusatory reaction towards Buren, and instead of admitting this, they emphasised that it was Buren's installation itself that hindered the visual fruition of their works¹⁰.

The fate of Buren's work was then essentially decided by five out of twenty-one artists participating in the *Sixth International Guggenheim Exhibition*. All five were Minimalist artists when Minimalism was considered in the United States a pivotal artistic movement. This shows that the censorship of Buren was not the result of a simple internal rift but the demonstration of the power in the hands of a predominant avant-garde which could be threatened by such radical ideas and jeopardise the centrality of U.S in the art system and especially the fabric of the New York City art world, considered one of the most important artistic production centres.

Another provoking contribution within Institutional Critique is Hans Haacke's artwork *Moma Poll* created in occasion of the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1970. The installation consisted of two transparent ballot boxes into which visitors had to insert their voting card after reading the question: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?"

Haacke's enquiry was connected to the fact that Nelson Rockefeller, the Republican governor of New York and member of the MoMA administration, was running for re-election that very year.

At the question posed by the artist, visitors had to cast their ballot into the left box if their answer was "yes" or into the right box if "no". At the end of the exhibition, most people answered "yes"¹¹.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

¹¹ H. Haacke, *Landmark Exhibitions Issue Lessons Learned*, Tate's online research journal, n.12, 2009, pp. 1-19, here pp. 5-6.



Figure 2, Hans Haacke, MoMA Poll, 1970, installation of Plexiglas boxes, poster board, ballot papers, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, © Hans Haacke/VG Bild-Kunst

This intervention represented not only a moment of radical critique towards the art institution but also the occasion to involve people in an action of critique and awareness about social and political issues.

Both Buren and Haacke are significant examples of Institutional Critique where the artists made visible that art institutions were not democratic nor neutral spaces.

During the 1980's the debate continued with a new phase of the Institutional Critique referred to as the New Museology. Peter Vergo, one of the proponents of New Museology, affirmed that "what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums"¹².

In fact, the concern of scholars of new museology was that museums were too much focused on problems of method (intended as visitor attendance, fiscal practices etc.) rather than on its purposes and the conflicts that often emerge in managing simultaneously all of them (preservation, research, display, education etc.).

¹² P. Vergo, *The New Museology*, Edited by P. Vergo, London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p.3.

Another theme in New Museology concerned the presence of some bias in the phases of collecting, classifying, and interpreting the objects in the museum. Indeed, the warning of “new museologists” was to be aware of the existence of personal and cultural criteria that make an object proper to be displayed or not. Therefore, once again museum was not considered neutral but rather a space where also political messages about ethnicity or nationalism show themselves in the themes chosen for an exhibition and in the way it was interpreted¹³.

Artists too were occupied to provoke museums with actions of critique. A notable example is *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* by the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of American feminist artists recognizable for the gorilla masks they wear to maintain anonymity. In 1989, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), it turned out that the number of woman artists represented by the museum was far lower with respect to the number of the naked female bodies featured in the artworks on display.



Figure 3, Guerrilla Girls, *Do Woman Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, printed ink on paper, 27.3 x 71.1 cm, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, Courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com.

The artists designed an impactful poster depicting the very famous *Grande Odalisque* (1814) by the French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres wearing a gorilla mask and they also inserted some eloquent statistic regarding the museum: ‘less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female’.

¹³ D. K. Washburn, *The New Museology*, in “Musuem Anthropology”, January vol. 16 n. 2, 2008, pp.58-61, here p.59.

The message of this work is a clear critique towards the lack of gender diversity at the Met and in the art world in general. Subsequently, the group gradually widened up its scope of action, tackling also issues such as racial discrimination¹⁴.

From the mid 1990s to the early 2000s the New Institutionalism, developed especially in the North-European context, represented another step in the examination of the social role of the contemporary art institution. The aim was to explore new approaches of curating to reform the art institution from within and transform it into a more democratic and egalitarian space. The museum, considered as a space of inclusion, had to involve the audience actively in critical reflection moments through the experience of art, thus stimulating a personal opinion. Important names related to New Institutionalism are Maria Lind, Charles Esche or Manuel Borja-Villel, all professionals of the cultural sector who have investigated and experimented over the years different system of curatorial practices¹⁵.

1.1.2 Questioning the art institution today: decolonisation at the heart of the debate

The long period of critical stance has for sure reshaped museum into a more open and receptive public sphere towards the social demands, however, it still has difficulties in defining its role in contemporary society and therefore to face the challenges of present day.

In 2019, at the Kyoto International Conference Centre, in Japan, the ICOM General Assembly was held to debate, among other issues, about the role of the contemporary museum trying to approve a new definition for it. Indeed, the last definition dated to 2007 and declared:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches,

¹⁴ E. Manchester, *Do Woman Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, in Tate Museum official website, December 2004/February 2005; <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793> [last access on 9 February 2022].

¹⁵ M. Deiana, *Handle with Care: The influence of New Institutionalism on Collection Displays in Italian Contemporary Art Museums*, in “Stedelijk Studies Journal”, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 1-17, here pp. 2-4.

communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment¹⁶.

The ICOM thought that this definition no longer seems to reflect the challenges, visions, and responsibility of our time. For this reason, the Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP), established in 2017, collected some alternative proposals from both ICOM Committees and museal institutions. The proposals were presented and discussed during the General Assembly in Kyoto and the result of this process was conceptualized in this way:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing¹⁷.

The Danish curator Jette Sandahl, who led the ICOM'S commission, suggested that this new definition was not appropriate for the language of the 21st century as it lacks cultural democracy¹⁸.

Sandahl was not the only one at odds indeed, this updated version didn't bring all the members of the General Council together at all. According to some members, the new version finally underlined the societal role of museums, whereas for others the traditional purposes of the museum were disregarded from the new proposal. For this reason, the approval of the definition was postponed in order to continue working on it¹⁹. Therefore, the question of what a museum should be does not seem to have a

¹⁶ Museum Definition, in ICOM official website, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [last access on 11 February 2022].

¹⁷ ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote, in ICOM official website, 25 July 2019; <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> [last access on 11 February 2022].

¹⁸ Z. Small, *A New Definition of "Museum" Sparks International Debate*, in "Hyperallergic", 19 August 2019; https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/?fbclid=IwAR2ztJtHqOrkJP89JqIqUV1oO6_aKl6_G7myd9C1Bi3XW4kPP-s7alHXdAg [last access on 11 February 2022].

¹⁹ R. Capozucca, *L'Icom non raggiunge un accordo sulla nuova definizione di Museo*, in "Il Sole 24 Ore", 1 October 2019; <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/l-icom-non-raggiunge-accordo-nuova-definizione-museo-ACPQyBo> [last access on 11 February 2022].

shared response yet and this lack of a definition might reveal the problem that art institutions have in representing our present time and its challenges.

According to Laura Raicovich, curator and interim director of Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York, one thing is certain about the nature of museums, they are not neutral spaces at all ²⁰. Museums are indeed subjected to economic, political and historical contests and to ideological apparatuses that shape their point of view and therefore their narratives and ways to communicate messages and values with the audience. The problem is that for centuries, the ruling narratives were dominated by a Western, patriarchal, heterosexual, and white perspective which have dragged on until today and still contribute to marginalize everything that is not line with these standards.

The questioning of art institutions in this sense has been an ongoing process in which plenty of initiatives, external to the circuit of the museum too, tried to make the difference contributing to the changing. A significant example is *documenta*, one of the most prestigious international contemporary art events held every five years in Kassel, Germany. The edition of the 2002 was particularly noteworthy because of its direction under Nigerian born curator Okwui Enwezor²¹ who followed inclusive, multicultural, and transnational logics for the design of the event which had resonance in the entire world of contemporary art. This allowed the event to represent a space of debates on topics such as social inequalities, inclusion, and representation of different cultures. Enwezor talking about the contemporary art world said:

The dissolution of the imperial architecture, if you will, or what used to be called the art world. Now, there are so many different worlds. Of course, this does not mean that they all have equal power, equal influence, or equal epistemological force. Rather, it means that while the so-called centers are doing their thing, these other art worlds continue doing theirs²².

²⁰ O. Bresciano, *Laura Raicovich: How Museums Can Become Spaces for Care*, in “ArtReview”, 9 December 2020; <https://artreview.com/laura-raicovich-how-museums-can-become-spaces-for-care/> [last access on 11 February 2022].

²¹ O. Enwezor has been one of the most important art critic and curator for contemporary art. Some of the important events that marked his career, besides *documenta* in 2002, were: his participation in the Johannesburg Biennial (1996) and the Gwangju Biennial (2008) as curator, the role of director of Haus der Kunst in Munich (2011-2018) and his participation as the first curator of African origin at the Venice Biennial in 2015.

²² O. Enwezor, cit. in T. Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating*, 2015.

With these words he wanted to highlight the fact that there are some points of reference in contemporary art that exercise more power, more influence (the western art perspective) but this does not exclude that other perspective are simultaneously producing good quality art. The difference is that they do not benefit from the same visibility. *documenta 11*, represented exactly the opportunity for the “other art worlds” to gain the visibility they deserve.

Another contribution is for instance, *L’Internationale* an online platform founded in 2014 which brings together seven major European Art Institution: MG+MSUM in Ljubljana; Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid; MACBA, Barcelona; M HKA, Antwerp; MSN, Warsaw, SALT Istanbul and Ankara and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. The platform gathers researchers, projects, reflections, and debates on specific themes related to the art world emphasizing the importance of difference, equal exchange, sharing and networking²³.

In the last decades activism too has played an important role in denouncing museum as an uncomfortable place especially in terms of equal representation and inclusivity. Plenty of collectives and movements, with different backgrounds and means of communication, have acted in this sense pursuing especially the struggle for the decolonization of museums. One amongst others is the movement *Decolonize This Place* which, for instance, focus its attention on prioritize the presence of black people in art institutions to challenge the white supremacy that characterize the art system.

Decolonization is more than ever central in the international debate thanks also to the increasing attention that postcolonial studies are giving to it.

Postcolonial studies are a quite recent area of research as they have been recognized as an institutionalized academic field only from the late 1970s. The analysis of postcolonial studies is centred on the consequences that colonialism era produced in terms of social, political, cultural, and economic impact on the colonized people and their lands. Indeed, art historian T. J. Demos, cited by Baldacci, declares that when referring to the period after the end of colonialism it would be more correct to use the

²³ For more information about *L’Internationale*: www.internationaleonline.org.

prefix 'neo' rather than 'post' as it underlines better that colonialism is not part of a past phase, but it continues to leave its traces in the present day too²⁴.

Hence the importance of the debate around the concept of decolonization that B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin defined in *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts* as:

The process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved²⁵.

Colonialism, which make us think about a remote past that does not pertain to us, is not concluded yet but it is rather in a new phase. Hence the necessity of decolonizing the systems where it survived. In the case of cultural system and specifically in contemporary museums, colonialism survived in the predominant narration of Western art as the point of reference which demand to represent the other non-Western narrations too. In this way, those who are considered minorities are denied both the possibility to be equally part of the art system and to self-represent their art, thus their culture and historical memory. This approach is exactly in the logic of colonialism where there is a dominant culture controlling and exploiting a subjugated one.

The ethnocentric view characterizing our society hides the attempt to confront the fear of otherness that is very strong nowadays despite globalization brought us to live in contact with cultural difference every day. This fear for the Other could be defeated within the space of the museum that should have the responsibility of encouraging people to approach and understand the "other" through art. Of course, art alone cannot oppose this ethnocentric system, but it can start a process of knowledge and awareness of it and its consequences in society.

²⁴T.J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2013, in C. Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili. Un'ossessione dell'arte contemporanea*, Monza: Johan & Levi, 2016, cit., p. 52.

²⁵ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2007, p.56.

1.2 Italian colonialism: an uncomfortable past that affects the present

1.2.1 The experience of Italian colonialism and the construction of the Italian racial identity

In the previous paragraph it was said that the debate around decolonization, especially in the museal sector, is very active but this is not the case of Italy where this concept is still struggling to enter the public debate. Why does Italy struggle to approach this subject? To answer this question it is useful to look back at the colonial past of the country and to its process of Italian identity formation.

Immediately after Unification in 1861, Italy felt the necessity to catch up with other European nations. To do this, Italy had to first begin a process of building a strong national identity in an attempt to appear as an advanced unified political entity that could compete with the other nations.

In order to create this Italian identity, the country first had to manage the multiple local identities present in the territory, the result of the different dominations that for centuries fragmented the peninsula. The first step was thus to homogenise the country. One important action in this sense was to modernize the areas of the country considered underdeveloped, namely the South and then rural and mountains regions of the peninsula. As early as the first decades of the 19th century, it was already consolidated that there was a substantial difference between north and south defined by the origins of the populations, which for those in the north was European/Germanic/Aryan origins, while for the southern lineages the origin was Latin/Mediterranean. However, according to these theories, although the Roman Empire was counted among the political constitutions of Nordic/Arian (thus, white) origin, the mixing of Romans Latin, Africans and Middle Eastern as a result of the expansion of the empire, had led to a degeneration of the Latin race and the fall of the empire. This degeneration was considered particularly evident in the south territories caused especially by the Semitics (Arab/North African) forays consequent to the desegregation of Rome. These theories confirmed “scientifically” the substantial gap between North and South. With the successive support of theses by eminent representatives of the scientific community such as Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo, the South had to be “purged” as southerners were considered as an inferior

race suffering from a congenital intellectual weakness that had to be civilized due to their propensity at instability, indiscipline, criminality, alcoholism. In addition, the somatic features like the darker pigmentation recalled the black skin of African people. All these features which testified an historic and genetic inferiority of the South, legitimized a civilization intervention of the State in terms of literacy, improvement of sanitary conditions or, when necessary, the confinement of dangerous people in prisons and asylums²⁶.

The result of the circulation of these theories created a real situation of segregation and discrimination towards the “black” southerners pushing away the country from an idea of homogeneous Italianness.

The other fundamental aspect for Italy to appear on par with the other countries was the participation in the colonial adventure. Indeed Italy, together with major European powers, wanted to participate in the competition for the occupation and the dominion of Africa. Specifically, Italy began its long colonisation process in the African Horn in 1882 with the occupation of Eritrea and in 1919 the country had already gained also additional vast territories such as Somalia and Libya. The ambition of expanding the overseas possessions of the Fascist Italy brought in 1936 to the control of Ethiopia too. With the advent of the World War II and the subsequent Italian defeat, the country’s colonial history came to an end with the loss of the empire and the colonies even if Italy maintained a trusteeship with Somalia until 1960. The colonial experience of Italy was not limited to the African continent, but it also comprehended the Concession of Tien Tsin in China, the Dodecanese, and the protectorate of the Kingdom of Albania²⁷.

The fact that they were able to build a colonial empire over a period of time was a way for the country to “overcome their inferiority complex toward wealthier and powerful European nations”²⁸. However, the process of creating an Italian identity, which would have shown Italy as a unified political entity, was not accomplished yet.

²⁶ G. Giuliani, *L’Italiano Negro. La bianchezza degli italiani dall’unità al Fascismo*, in *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani*, edited by G. Giuliani, C. Lombardi-Diop, Firenze: Le Monnier, 2013, pp.21-65, here pp. 29-32.

²⁷ N. Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002, pp. 57-209.

²⁸ G. Ghiglione, *As Europe Reckons with Racism. Italy Still Won’t Confront Its Colonial Past*, in “Foreign Policy”, 30 July 2020; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/as-europe-reckons-with-racism-italy-still-wont-confront-its-colonial-past/> [last access 15 February 2022].

During Fascism indeed, the attempt to unify Italians continued with the intent of valorising the strong Italic race that, even admitting that it was the result of a mixture of different races, it had been through a process of “blood purification” thanks to the glorious fate of the peninsula which included over the centuries for example, the glory of the Roman Empire, the presence of great intellectuals like Dante, the Renaissance, or the *Risorgimento*. This purification set-off a revaluation of the southerner who was no longer considered black, and thus inferior. Blackness was a characteristic belonging only to natives of the colonies²⁹.

The anthropological unification that the regime reached, consisted in the creation of a nation as an organic community where man must represent an authoritarian masculinity and patriarchal virtues of aggressive virility whereas the women, maternal and sensual figure, had the role of generating the new fascist citizens that the nation needed to sustain the empire. In particular, this role was assigned especially to the South which was transformed in the constitutive element of the regime’s new man. Indeed, besides the elements of the war, the colonial ambition or the industrial production, the Fascist society was also characterized by the idea of traditional catholic families, moral and social traditions that were considered related to the rural and southern model³⁰.

An interesting aspect is that in the construction of the Italians as white and Mediterranean, the colour of the skin was hardly ever explicitly mentioned. It was rather an implied aspect which defined the “other” as black or simply not white. Gaia Giuliani in reconstructing the history of the Italian racial identity stated that: “Their unexpressed whiteness is thus the result of a sort of ‘neutralisation’ of the racial identity of the Italian people - the body of the nation has a ‘neutral’ colour”³¹.

The Regime created thus a system where for all the people within the borders of the peninsula was not necessary to express the skin colour which was a prerogative only for the identification of those who were in the colonies. The construction of the Italian

²⁹ G. Giuliani, *Mediterraneità e Bianchezza. Il Razzismo italiano tra Fascismo e articolazioni contemporanee (1861-2015)*, in “Iperstoria”, 2015, pp.167-182, here pp.169-170.

³⁰ G. Giuliani, *L’Italiano Negro. La bianchezza degli italiani dall’unità al Fascismo*, in *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani*, edited by G. Giuliani, C. Lombardi-Diop, Firenze: Le Monnier, 2013, here pp. 39-41.

³¹ “La loro bianchezza inespresa è così il risultato di una sorta di ‘neutralizzazione’ dell’identità razziale del popolo italiano - il corpo della nazione ha un colore ‘neutro’”. Ibid., here p. 41.

identity was built then in the other's otherness implying that Italians did not see themselves as white but rather as normal, as human by default³².

In the life of the colonies however, the difference of the colour was more evident in the everyday life where Mussolini tried to create a clear separation between colonisers and colonised (people). That is reasons why Italy decided to adopt, starting from 1937, an explicitly racial legislation to protect the "Italian race" especially from the threat of the *meticciato* (cultural intermixing). The first racial decree sentenced from one to five years' imprisonment those people who had relationships with colonial individuals. The aim of this regulation was to prevent sexual relations between Italian men and African women in order to avoid the birth of Afro-Italian children who constituted a threat for the preservation of the purity of the "Italian race". The regime started then a massive media campaign to depict *meticci* (mixed race people) in a negative way, representing the black body as physically and morally inferior, even underlying for instance the ugliness of black women. In 1940, the regime introduced some norms which made illegal for an Italian parent to recognise his or her own mixed-race children, since by law, they were no longer considered Italian but pure Africans, as they were partly descended from African blood³³. It is clear then that the intent was to establish a clear colour line which defined the whiteness of the colonizer as the product of the inferiority of the colonized³⁴.

Despite the though reality of the country's colonialism, there was a widespread thought that the Italian colonizer possessed a good-natured personality that legitimated the 'kind' colonialism (opposite to the other aggressive European colonialisms) whose mission was to bring advancement and wealth in the occupied lands. It is precisely this benevolence feature of Italians that would have prevent them from committing inhuman actions³⁵. Unfortunately, Italian colonialism, as all colonialist experiences,

³²C. Lombardi- Diop, *Postracial/Postcolonial Italy*, in *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by C. Lombardi-Diop, C. Romeo, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp.175-190, here p. 175-176.

³³ A. Pesarini, *Il sangue non è acqua. La materializzazione del corpo razziale nell'Africa orientale fascista*, in *Colonialità e culture visuali in Italia. Percorsi critici tra ricerca artistica, pratiche teoriche e sperimentazioni pedagogiche*, edited by L. Cippitelli and S. Frangi, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021, pp.55-72, here pp.63-68.

³⁴ G. Giuliani, *L'Italiano Negro. La bianchezza degli italiani dall'unità al Fascismo*, in *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*, edited by G. Giuliani, C. Lombardi-Diop, Firenze: Le Monnier, 2013, here p. 59.

³⁵ C. Fogu, *Italiani Brava Gente*, in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, edited by R.N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, C. Fogu, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2006, pp.147-176, here p.147.

entailed the use of an inconceivable violence which resulted, for instance, in the use of chemical weapons, the construction of concentration camps, tortures, and imprisonments without trial.

1.2.2 The missed debate on Italian colonialism and its traces in the present

Even if the colonial adventure of Italy is a very significant chapter of its history, already after the end of the second World War it was erased from the Italian memory. The necessity to leave an inconvenient past behind like the Fascist era, also cancelled the colonialism experience that was seen as a direct product of the regime (forgetting that colonialist occupations started much earlier, in 1882). Thus, Italians went through a process of self-absolution as the brutalities committed pertained to a past where the post-war Italians were not involved and therefore there was nothing that could be done about it. In truth, the responsibility of the country would have been to recognize the errors committed, introducing over years the experience of colonialism in the public debate and in the education system too.

The educational system has played a central role in the portrayal of Italian colonialism since the phase of colonial expansion when the school represented colonialism in a celebratory perspective with the diffusion, through the textbooks of the time, of the myth of civilisation. However, even after the loss of the colonies the historical textbooks for schools continued to maintain the narration of the Fascist era. Starting from 60's and 70's, the space dedicated to the Italian colonial history in the scholastic programs has been significantly reduced. It is in this period indeed that the myth of *Italiani brava gente* (Italians decent people), which A. Del Boca defines as “a false myth that has covered and absolved too many abominations”³⁶, is diffused and at the same time, the war crimes committed by the Italian army in the colonies tends to be buried thus scaling down the colonial history and fostering the idea of a limited and

³⁶ “Il falso mito degli ‘italiani brava gente’, che ha coperto e assolto troppo infamie”. A. Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005, here p. 315.

A. Del Boca is an Italian essayist and historian of the Italian colonialism who traces, in the book just cited, the history of Italy in the period from 1861 to 1946, examining some particularly heinous episodes in Italian history that can testify to the hypocrisy and falsity of the appellation Italian decent people, circulating since the last decades of the 19th century and persisted over time. According to Del Boca, Italians, in carrying out their criminal deeds, have always differed from other countries in their use of this self-consolatory instrument, which has allowed and continues to conceal the brutalities committed.

less detrimental colonialism with respect to the other European experiences. There have been positive changes in the last two decades, but the legacy of these choices influences the current educational system which is loaded with cultural legacies, and it is not yet prepared to deal with colonialism in its complexity. In addition to this, it would be essential to study it with an approach that considers the multiplicity of points of view of the events that took place³⁷.

This lack of responsibility in dealing with the past has influenced the way in which today Italy still faces racial stereotypes of colonial nature, forms of supremacist, endemic racism, and Eurocentrism³⁸.

The silence that for years have characterized the topic of Italian colonialism is also quite ironic if we consider the urban space where we live in, which is full of evidences of colonialism in monuments or street's names that celebrate people who contributed to build the Italian empire.

In 2012, in the municipality of Affile, in Rome, it was erected a monument dedicated to the so called “butcher” Rodolfo Graziani, general and politician active in Libya and Ethiopia during the colonial era, renowned for his brutality which included the use of toxic gases and the massacre of thousands of people in the colonies. For these reasons, he was accused of war crimes by the UN after the war, although this did not lead to any conclusion, as he never came to trial for the atrocities committed³⁹. Despite all this, recently it was inexplicably decided to build a monument in his memory. However, this fact should not be particularly surprising since, as art historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat observes, Italy did not at all go through a re-education programme regarding its Fascist monuments. In this regard, she makes a provocative remark about the preservation of a specific building in Rome, the *Colosseo Quadrato* (Square Colosseum)⁴⁰.

³⁷ A. Fredianelli, *Ricerca artistica e curatoriale come spazi per (ri)pensare l'insegnamento del colonialismo italiano*, in *Colonialità e culture visuali in Italia. Percorsi critici tra ricerca artistica, pratiche teoriche e sperimentazioni pedagogiche*, pp.283-299, here pp.284-285.

³⁸ A. Ferrini, S. Frangi, *La responsabilità di un impero*, in “Flash Art”, 1 November 2017; <https://flash-art.it/article/la-responsabilita-di-un-impero/> [last access on 17 February 2022].

³⁹ *Il monumento a Rodolfo Graziani*, in “Il Post”, 30 September 2012; <https://www.ilpost.it/2012/09/30/il-monumento-a-rodolfo-graziani/> [last access 20 April 2022].

⁴⁰ R. Ben-Ghiat, *Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?*, in “The New Yorker”, 5 October 2017; <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy> [last access 17 March 2022].

The Square Colosseum is located in EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma), an urban district designed in the 1930s to host the 1942 Universal Exhibition, which never took place due to the outbreak of World War II. Some of the most eminent Italian architects of the time were involved in the construction of EUR, such as La Padula, Guerrini and Romano, who designed the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (Square Colosseum). Over the years the area has been enriched with various buildings, including the Palazzo dello Sport, designed in the 1960s for the Olympics, or the new Convention Centre (called La Nuvola) designed in 2008. It has also become a financial centre, housing the headquarters of several banks and a museum centre as it houses several museums including the Museo delle Civiltà⁴¹. However, the symbol of the district is still the Square Colosseum which is currently headquarters of the luxury fashion brand *Fendi*, and still has on its exterior an engraved phrase uttered by Mussolini in 1935 describing Italians "as a people of artists, heroes, saints, thinkers, scientists, navigators and transmigrants". In essence, Ben-Ghiat states that the country has over the years simply removed the most obvious traces of fascism such as the busts of Mussolini or the Fascist emblems⁴².

The Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego also questions the signs of the Fascist era in the public space we live in. She recognizes the difficulty in dealing with a legacy that from one hand is part of our cultural heritage but from the other side is testimony of a violent past which unfortunately contaminates the present. She encourages the debate around these traces of memory underlying the importance of establishing a relation with them to know and to reinvent these memories⁴³.

This lack of discussion about the country's colonialism is due to the fact also that Italy did not went through a proper process of decolonization. Indeed, Italy lost the colonies

⁴¹ *La storia della nascita dell'Eur*, in "7Colli", 3 February 2020; <https://www.7colli.it/la-storia-della-nascita-delleur-152/> [last access 20 April 2022].

⁴² R. Ben-Ghiat, *Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?*, in "The New Yorker", 5 October 2017; <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy> [last access 17 March 2022].

⁴³ I. Scego, *Cosa fare con le tracce scomode del nostro passato*, in "Internazionale", 9 June 2020; <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2020/06/09/tracce-passato-colonialismo-razzismo-fascismo> [last access on 17 February 2022].

after losing the war. Other countries instead experienced civil rights movements (the case of Britain in India) or went through independence wars (as France with Algeria)⁴⁴. A recent action of decolonization is the one that involved another controversial monument, the Indro Montanelli statue covered with washable pink paint by the feminist collective *Non una di meno* during Woman's Day in 2019.



Figure 4, Vito Tongiani, Indro Montanelli monument, 2006, gilded bronze, Public gardens Indro Montanelli, Milan, source: *La Repubblica*

Montanelli, besides being a very important Italian journalist, was also a supporter of the colonial empire. The intervention of the collective wanted to bring to light the story of Montanelli who bought a 12-year-old Eritrean girl with which he had sexual relations during his period of soldier in the 1930's in Ethiopia. The action of the collective triggered a heated debate in which some sustained that Montanelli's behaviour must be contextualized in that historical period when these habits were common practices as Montanelli himself declared several times. The fact that some people justified these habits is yet another proof of an uncomfortable past that the country don't want to admit and confront. The pink varnish on the statue wanted to make reflect on the suffering of that little girl which is a symbol of the general pain that Italy caused with its crimes in the African colonies.

⁴⁴G. Ghiglione, *As Europe Reckons with Racism. Italy Still Won't Confront Its Colonial Past*; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/as-europe-reckons-with-racism-italy-still-wont-confront-its-colonial-past/> [last access 17 February 2022].

It is evident then, that the experience of colonialism still influences our present, leaving to us the idea of a superiority towards otherness. Decolonize would mean for us, white people, to give up power and privilege we have or share this power with the ‘others’⁴⁵. The reflection that *Non una di meno* did on the monument dedicated to Montanelli can represent therefore the needed questioning of the vestiges of our past that Scego suggested as a first step to accelerate the process of decolonization in the country.

1.3 The ethnographic museum as starting point for the decolonial debate in Italy

1.3.1 The ethnographic collections: a cultural heritage to be questioned

The Italian anthropologist Giulia Grechi introduces her book *Decolonizzare il Museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati* with the initial scene of the film *Black Panther* (2018) where a white woman presents to an afro-descendant visitor some African artefacts of the museum’s ethnographic collection. The woman provides the visitor with precise information about the objects displayed but the man does not seem convinced by the curator's knowledges indeed, he puts her to the test asking for details about a specific object. The visitor knows that the information she gives about it are wrong because the artefact pertains to his ancestors. At this point, the man provokes the curator asking her if she knows how her ancestors got all the objects of the collection, if a fair price was paid for them or whether it was simply a case of appropriation⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ A. Ferlito, *Esercizi decoloniali: Il contributo di una pratica curatoriale situata*, in “Echo. Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication”, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 130-136, here p. 131.

⁴⁶ G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il Museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021, pp. 15-16.



Figure 5, Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther*, IMBD © 2018 – Disney / Marvel Studios

This scene is representative of a central issue that anthropological and ethnographic museums are facing about problematic cultural heritage related to colonialism.

The museum was born as a European institution during the colonial era with the aim of representing the world through the accumulation of objects as a method for the classification and categorization of reality, an attitude at the basis of the European culture⁴⁷. This is especially the case for anthropological and ethnographic museums devoted to the collection and display of artefacts from extra-European worlds. These worlds were often represented through the display of simple items like rough materials, stuffed animals or handmade products that were meant to depict them as underdeveloped societies, thus justifying the mission of civilisation⁴⁸. With this practice Europe has over the centuries defined its own representation of the world with the arrogance of thinking it as the unquestionable truth.

The collections of many ethnographic museums we have today are indeed the result of colonial loots and for this reason they are at the centre of the protests by many associations, activist movements who fight to ensure that museums start to consider their responsibilities towards their controversial collections.

It was precisely the image of the museum as a place of accumulation of objects and pillage of other's wealth that inspired the project of the "museum without objects" followed and promoted, among others, by Françoise Vergès, an intellectual originally from Réunion Island, a former French colony. The project was conceived for the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

museum *la Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise* (MCUR), launched in 2000 by the Regional Council of Réunion Island but stopped in 2010 as it was considered useless and unnecessary. It was precisely within this museum that it would have been possible, by implementing the idea of the museum without objects, to produce a counter-narrative opposite to that of the classic ethnographic museums that accumulate looted objects to tell the, often incomplete and untrue, story of the colonised and oppressed people⁴⁹. As Vergès argues for the museum without objects: “we turned our attention to small things, *objets de rien*, objects with no market value - objects that had a biography, that had travelled”⁵⁰.

In addition to these *objets de rien*, the idea was to complement the intangible culture composed of images, sounds, games, and narratives related to the history of the island and its people, which is unfortunately very poorly documented. The aim of the project was precisely to create a new type of museum within which to contextualise and transmit the culture of Réunion Island, which is particularly exceptional for its intercultural character, and to promote a space for social change, where stereotypes could be countered and alternative narratives suggested, open to revisions and reinterpretations over time⁵¹.

This project, unfortunately abandoned, represents an excellent food for thought for ethnographic institutions to rethink their collections, perhaps trying to introduce similar practices to promote a process of decolonization.

According to Grechi, in the specific case of the ethnographic museum, restitution could also be a good starting point for decolonization of those collections that are the result of the colonial experience⁵².

Many countries have stressed the issue of restitution over the past few years; a recent case is the one related to France and the restitution of African's artworks.

In 2017, in occasion of a speech held in Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso, the President Emmanuel Macron announced the commitment of France to return the

⁴⁹ F. Vergès, *Un museo senza oggetti*, in “Scritture Migranti. Rivista di scambi culturali”, n. 8, 2014, pp. 159-178, here p.159.

⁵⁰ “Abbiamo rivolto la nostra attenzione alle cose piccole, *objets de rien*, oggetti privi di valore di mercato - oggetti che avevano una biografia, che avevano viaggiato”. Ibid., here p. 160.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 165-169.

⁵² G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il Museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021, p. 20.

African heritage. This topic has always been problematic due to one of the most important laws in terms of culture legislation which declares the imprescriptible and inalienable character of public collections of the country⁵³.

In 2016, France had denied the restitution of Beninese's objects requested by the President Patrice Talon's, but after the announcement of Emmanuel Macron of 2017, he reiterated his request and in 2020 France returned 26 artworks, previously belonging to the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, which constitute the Treasure of Behanzin, looted by the French army in 1892 as war spoils from the Abomey Palace⁵⁴.

The treasures dates to the kingdom of Dahomey (south of present-day Benin) and included the throne of Behanzin, the last king of Dahomey, along with four palace doors, three totemic statues, three warrior dance staffs and plenty of portable altars⁵⁵. Despite the handing back of the Treasure, Benin's President affirmed that he was not satisfied of the draft legislation that brought to the restitution of the artworks considering it just an initial step and encouraging France to go further.

The dissatisfaction was and is still felt by many French museums too who are scared that this action can represent a precedent for the return of many other artworks, contributing in 'emptying' the country's museums for which it is estimated that they collect more than ninety thousand African's artworks. Moreover, among those who want to defend the French museum heritage, there is a mistrust of the competence of African museums to properly promote and preserve works⁵⁶.

This distrust is the symptom that decolonization of museums still has a long way to go.

⁵³ *Restituzione dei beni culturali provenienti dalla colonizzazione. Il caso della Francia*, in "Fatti Fregio", 1 October 202; <https://fattifregio.it/restituzione-dei-beni-culturali-provenienti-dalla-colonizzazione-il-caso-della-francia/> [last access on 21 February 2022].

⁵⁴ L. De Micco, *Le 26 opere che torneranno nel Benin*, in "Il Giornale dell'Arte", 25 October 2021; <https://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/articoli/le-26-opere-che-torneranno-nel-benin/137140.html> [last access on 21 February 2022].

⁵⁵ *Final show in France for looted Benin treasures*, in "France 24", 26 October 2021; <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211026-final-show-in-france-for-looted-benin-treasures> [last access on 23 February 2022].

⁵⁶ A. Ravasi, *Legge su restituzione delle opere d'arte all'Africa: il dibattito*, 10 October 2020; <https://www.africarivista.it/legge-su-restituzione-delle-opere-darte-allafrica-il-dibattito/174132/#> [last access on 23 February].

1.3.2 Good decolonial practices in Italian ethnographic museums: the cases of Museo Pigorini, Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi and MAET

In Italy as well the issues of challenging the ethnographic collections and restitutions, is still not sufficiently addressed. However, there are some Italian institutions that are trying to change direction; the Pigorini Museum in Rome is one example.

The palaeontologist Luigi Pigorini founded the Museum in the capital city in 1876, thanks to the acquisition of objects from various Italian collections. In his academic research, Pigorini tried to relate Italian prehistoric civilisations to those of northern Europe to support the thesis of a common Aryan racial root. These theses naturally influenced the ethical programme of the museum, which sought to support, in line with the scientific racist theses of the time, the idea of a white Italian identity in contrast to the populations of the African territories occupied by the Italians. The museum collected objects of great artistic and material value such as ivory oliphants or precious raffia fabrics from the Kingdom of Kongo. However, as was often the case in ethnographic museums, the objects entered the collection stripped of their true value due to ignorance of their context of origin or their real significance for the people who had created them. A research and reinterpretation of these artefacts has been carried out since 2019 by the Congolese-born artist and photographer Sammy Baloji, who for several years has dedicated his work to the relation between the West and Africa, starting precisely from the artefacts collected in Western ethnographic museums⁵⁷. The Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum named after its founder is now part of the Museo delle Civiltà (Muciv) in Rome, together with two other institutes. The Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi is one of these and it represents another example of collections reinterpretation.

The museum was inaugurated in 1923 by Mussolini with the name of Museo Coloniale di Roma. It had a collection of objects coming from the colonies with the aim to propagandise the Italian experience in Africa. Over the years it went through many changes in terms of location and museum management, but the most recent ones were in 2017 when it was entrusted to the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and inserted

⁵⁷ L. Cippitelli, *Classificazioni sovversive. Arte, artefatti, collezioni, decolonialità dello sguardo, in Colonialità e culture visuali in Italia. Percorsi critici tra ricerca artistica, pratiche teoriche e sperimentazioni pedagogiche*, pp.261-272, here pp. 269-271.

within the museum complex of Muciv and in 2020, when it was entitled to Ilaria Alpi, an Italian journalist killed in Mogadishu where she investigated on the relations between Italy and Somalia⁵⁸.

The museum today sets itself the goal of narrating to the public the controversial relations between Italy and Africa from a collective point of view. The idea indeed is to make the collection available for artists, researchers and visitors especially coming from the countries that have been subjected to Italian colonization. The museum has also the function of collective centre for artefacts pertaining to Italian families whose relatives participated in the military experience in Ethiopia⁵⁹.

The aim is to represent this chapter of history with the engagement of the whole society; the families of those people who experienced the colonization from one hand and the people whose relatives participated in the experience as colonizer from the other, as well as the public to whom the reflection is addressed. The prospective of the museum, however, is targeted not only at the reconstruction of the past but at the investigation of the present relation between Italy and Africa through exhibitions, laboratories, and artistic residencies. Indeed, it is important for the museum that the interpretation of collections can easily follow the progression of the studies and debates about the colonial memories⁶⁰. The most recent activity organized is *Depositi aperti. Come immaginare un museo decoloniale?*⁶¹ a programme of events such as conferences, meetings, laboratories, books' presentations opened in 2021 and extended throughout 2022. The focus is of course the creation of dialogues and confrontation regarding the collections and the legacy of colonialism⁶².

⁵⁸ G. Delpino, *Un museo di propaganda, un museo chiuso e occultato, un museo da rimeditare e riaprire: dal Museo coloniale al Museo italo africano "Iliaria Alpi"*, in "asaiafrica.org"; <https://www.asaiafrica.org/blacklivesmatter-italia-asai/un-museo-di-propaganda-un-museo-chiuso-e-occultato-un-museo-da-rimeditare-e-riaprire-dal-museo-coloniale-al-museo-italo-africano-ilaria-alpi/> [last access on 23 February].

⁵⁹ I. Scego, *Cosa fare con le tracce scomode del nostro passato*, in "Internazionale", [last access on 24 February 2022].

⁶⁰ G. Delpino, *Un museo di propaganda, un museo chiuso e occultato, un museo da rimeditare e riaprire: dal Museo coloniale al Museo italo africano "Iliaria Alpi"*; <https://www.asaiafrica.org/blacklivesmatter-italia-asai/un-museo-di-propaganda-un-museo-chiuso-e-occultato-un-museo-da-rimeditare-e-riaprire-dal-museo-coloniale-al-museo-italo-africano-ilaria-alpi/> [last access on 24 February].

⁶¹ "Open deposits. How to imagine a decolonial museum?".

⁶² *Depositi aperti. Come immaginare un museo decoloniale?*, in "museocivilta.cultura.gov.it"; <https://museocivilta.cultura.gov.it/depositi-aperti-progetto/> [last access on 24 February].

For what concerns the restitution, unfortunately museums in Italy does not have decisional power to return objects as they are state-owned properties, however the institution can bring to light this necessity⁶³.

Differently from the Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi, the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia (MAET) in Turin has never been explicitly colonial but the collection modalities of its ethnographic artefacts have been the accumulation of objects as scientific evidence of the inferiority of extra-European cultures, typical of the colonial era. Indeed, also the past of this museum is quite problematic due to the support of the National Fascist Party by its founder, Giovanni Marro who allowed the use of a nationalist and racist rhetoric in the exhibition spaces of the museum. The names of the sections *Sala della Razza* or *Sala della Stirpe* mounted for the exposition *Torino e l'autarchia*⁶⁴ in 1939 are quite eloquent of a political use of the collection to support the fascist ideology of the existence of an Italic race.

In 1984 the museum was obliged to close, and for a long time it became just a simple deposit thus remaining cut off from important debates like decolonization and restitutions. Fortunately, over the years the museum questioned its uncomfortable past succeeding in renovating the communication of the ethnographic collections with an intercultural and intergenerational perspective⁶⁵.

Between 2008 and 2009, the MAET presented the exhibition *Lingua contro Lingua*. The project was in collaboration with several migrants of the first generation and members of the Turin diaspora community as cultural mediators who contributed to bring the multiplicity of viewpoints inside the institution and at the same time it represented an opportunity for them to get to know the artefacts in the collection directly, without the intermediation of the white European perspective⁶⁶. The exhibition transformed the museum into a space of encounter, understanding and

⁶³G. Delpino, *Un museo di propaganda, un museo chiuso e occultato, un museo da rimeditare e riaprire: dal Museo coloniale al Museo italo africano "Ilaria Alpi"*; <https://www.asiafrica.org/blacklivesmatter-italia-asai/un-museo-di-propaganda-un-museo-chiuso-e-occultato-un-museo-da-rimeditare-e-riaprire-dal-museo-coloniale-al-museo-italo-africano-ilaria-alpi/> [last access on 24 February].

⁶⁴ The exposition "Turin and the autarky" presented the two sections named "Race Room" and "Ancestry Room".

⁶⁵ G. Mangiapane, E. Grasso, *Il MAET fra decolonizzazione e accessibilità culturale*, in "Nuova Museologia", n. 41, November 2019, pp.37- 43, here p. 40.

⁶⁶ A. M. Pecci, G. Mangiapane, *Lingua contro Lingua. Una mostra collaborativa*, in "Museologia Scientifica", n. 8, 2011, pp. 104 -106, here p. 105.

respect of the different cultural identities and, at the same time, it promoted the ethnographic collection but with a totally different interpretation.

As Grechi underlines there is:

“[...] the need for the museum to engage in a daily practice of (self-)critical and reflective analysis, and the willingness to confront, starting from those objects, with different subjects, different points of view and different competences, even if this confrontation radically questions the "scientific" authority of the museum itself.⁶⁷

The way for museums then, not only the ethnographic ones, to start a process of decolonization is to do a self-critical analysis that can be facilitated precisely by the confrontation of multiple points of view, external to the museum as well, on the collections and its story as we saw in the examples of the Museo Italo Africano Ilaria Alpi and the MAET.

Nonetheless, for the Western system of the museum is not easy to allow a “foreigner” gaze to enter the space of the institution because it represents the threat of overturning that ethnocentric narration fostered by colonialism, that for centuries we told ourselves and imposed on the others. This is exactly what happens in the opening scene of the film *Black Panther* described above when the Afro-descendent man starts to question the information on the collection artefacts given by the white curator who seems to feel immediately threatened by his presence and his different perspective, thus inviting him to leave the museum.

To let an external gaze, enter the institution space, would mean to reconsider the whole occidental apparatus of knowledge, but this is exactly what is needed to abandon the ethnocentric vision and open to an egalitarian system.

In the case of Italy, the colonial experience and all the tradition of scientific theories, stereotypes and perceptions that followed removed after the WWII until present day, has contributed to produce a system of mistrust, refusal of the alterity and racism that cannot be tolerated anymore, especially considering the multicultural composition of the country. The fear and the toxic approaches towards otherness are the result of ignorance in the knowledge of the ‘other’. The ethnographic museum can represent in

⁶⁷“[...] la necessità che il museo si impegni in una prassi quotidiana di analisi (auto)critica e riflessiva, e la disponibilità a confrontarsi, a partire da quegli oggetti, con diversi soggetti, con diversi punti di vista e diverse competenze, anche se questo confronto mette radicalmente in discussione l’autorità “scientifica” del museo stesso”; G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il Museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, p. 32.

this sense a good starting point for the people's education and an example of good decolonial practices to be followed for contemporary art museums too.

CHAPTER 2 – The Afro-descendant presence in the art system. The case of the United States as a point of reference and the delay of black inclusion in Italy

2.1 The struggle for the inclusion of African Americans in contemporary art museums

United States is commonly the point of reference when speaking about Afro-descendant people and related issues such as underrepresentation and exclusion, and this is because of the struggles that African Americans have carried out in the attempt to gain their space in society.

Afro-descendants has always occupied a fundamental part in the history of the country's creation and economic growth. Even before the birth of the United States, the importation of African people into the first colonies began, where they were enslaved for instance as domestic servants or pickers in the numerous colonial plantations.

The experience of slavery continued throughout the country also after 1776 (date of the birth of the United States) until the 13th amendment of the American Constitution of the United States which officially abrogated slavery in 1865. However, due to the Jim Crow laws issued between the 1870 and lasted until 1960, the country continued to perpetrate a system of segregation according to the principle of “separate but equal” which determined for instance, the separation of black and white persons in public services like transportation, hospitals⁶⁸.

It goes without saying that the approval of these provisions restricted the rights of African Americans in all aspects of their lives. It was this very condition that led African Americans through a long process of emancipation throughout the 20th century that saw the emergence of a number of movements, such as the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s or the Black Panther Party during the 1970s through which black Americans sought equal rights in a white-dominated society. The scale of events in the United States makes it obvious why the country is a landmark

⁶⁸ L. Battaglia, *La segregazione razziale negli Stati Uniti d'America*, in “Policlic”, n. 2, 27 June, 2020, pp.19-22, here pp. 19-21; <https://www.policlic.it/la-segregazione-razziale-negli-stati-uniti-damerica/> [last access 23 March].

when it comes to marginalisation and seek for equal representation. During this process of struggle, art was a means for black people to make their voices heard.

In the first decades of the 20th century with the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans began to tell their story of oppression and try to reconceptualise the figure of the “Negro” by overcoming white stereotypes through artistic expressions like literature, theatre, music, and visual arts. The Renaissance was not confined to the Harlem district of New York City, which was just the centre of diffusion of this cultural awakening that then spread throughout the country⁶⁹.

With the civil rights movement, there was a new wave of awareness from African American artists who wanted to be represented like their white artists colleagues especially in art institutions. However, the process was not so automatic.

Until the late 20th century, African American artists were almost entirely absent from the cultural system both as producers and consumers. Museums featuring African American artworks were very few and unfortunately exactly the art institutions were the ones which determined what was considered high art, therefore valuable, and what was not, through a process of selection and display that in those years excluded the presence of African American artists⁷⁰.

2.1.1 Early exhibitions of African American artists in the 20th century. *Harlem on My Mind* and *Contemporary Black Artists in America*: two controversial exhibitions

One of the first significant exhibitions at national level featuring African American artists was the *Contemporary Negro Art* exhibition held at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1939.

The exhibition was born when the Board of Trustees President of the museum, Henry Treide, conducted a city-wide survey of specific Baltimore social groups, asking what they wanted to see from their city art museum. The committee which represented the city’s African American community responded that the museum should had displayed

⁶⁹ G. Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, in “Encyclopedia Britannica”, 7 January 2022; <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art> [last access 23 March 2022].

⁷⁰ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, p.1.

artworks produced by African Americans and encouraged the black community of the city to attend these potential exhibitions. As a result, the Baltimore Museum organised an exhibition with 116 works by 29 black artists and the show also had more than 12,000 visitors⁷¹.



Figure 6, *Contemporary Negro Art* exhibition, installation view, 1939, Baltimore Museum of Art

Another occasion where black artists' works were exhibited was during *The Negro Artists Comes of Age. Portraits of Distinguished Negro Citizens* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1945, featuring 61 paintings and sculptures and also a group of portraits of distinguished black citizens⁷².

Although these two exhibitions gave space to African American artists, they remained in a segregated context.

In the late 1960s and early '70s several large-scale exhibitions of major museums in the United States started to host African American production; however, these exhibitions functioned as a further but more subtle mechanism of separation between art produced by the black community and the art produced by white people⁷³. Art produced by African Americans was indeed considered different with respect to the white community; as Bell Hooks, Afro-American writer feminist and activist,

⁷¹ *The BMA Revisits History with 1939: Exhibiting Black Art at the BMA. Landmark Exhibition Attracted 12,000 Visitors to BMA in Two Weeks*, 29 May 2018, Baltimore Museum of Art official website; <https://artbma.org/about/press/release/the-bma-revisits-history-with-1939-exhibiting-black-art-at-the-bma> [last access 23 March].

⁷² *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, in Brooklyn Museum official website; <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/1807> [last access 23 March].

⁷³ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, p.1.

affirmed, whatever type of art the black community created, tended to be considered a testimony, a challenging racist thinking which suggested that those black artists were uncivilised, not fully human, and thus not able to produce great art as white people. White supremacist ideology taught that black people, being considered animal rather than human, lacked the capacity to feel and therefore incapable of using sensibilities which are fundamental element to create high art⁷⁴.

The exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* held at the Metropolitan Museum in 1969 is representative of this mechanism of separation between black and white art. The intent of the curator Allon Schoener for this exhibition was to demonstrate that the museum was open to a broad spectrum of cultural interests and that it was receptive to contemporary cultural debates that included underrepresentation of African American artist in the museum system and in particular in the Met. The exhibition wanted to celebrate the social history of the Harlem neighbourhood in New York City through six thematic and chronological sections: “1900-1919, From White to Black Harlem”; “1920-1929, An Urban Black Culture”; “1930-1939, Depression and Hard Times”; “1940-1949, War, Hope, and Opportunity”; “1950-1959, Frustration and Ambivalence; and “1960-1968, Militancy and Identity.” Each section was structured with documentary photographs and newspaper texts through slide projections, photo blow-ups, videos, voice soundtrack and music. The aim of the curator was to create an experiential exhibition as if visitors were watching a movie, but it was this very set-up of the exhibition that sparked a series of protests that underlined exhibition’s failure. According to Schoener, *Harlem on my Mind* had to prove the potential of Harlem’s black community who had a great impact on influencing American culture in terms of music, theatre and literature, while museum director Thomas P. Hoving responded that the show was a sincere effort to make the history of Harlem known. The reason for the failure was that a great contribution to the cultural development of Harlem was given by painters and sculptors who were omitted from the exhibition, which was at last an audio-visual exposition also lacking adequate explanatory information since in all the rooms Schoener did not implement captions for the images but simply descriptions of

⁷⁴ B. Hooks, *An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional*, in “Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry”, vol. 1, 1995, pp. 65-72, here p. 66; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4177045?seq=1> [last access 7 June 2022].

the contents of the exhibition rooms. Moreover, the Met had never shown photography, but decided to do so for this exhibition dedicated to Harlem and its black community, excluding visual art. The result of the exhibition was thus an accentuation of the already existing problem of distinguishing “art” from the less valuable “African American art”⁷⁵.



Figure 7, *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, installation view, 1969, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, © Metropolitan Museum of Art

Contemporary Black Artists in America, held in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art is another case of a controversial show that tried to demonstrate the museum as a cultural facilitator for black representation in institutions, but with poor results. In planning the exhibition, curator Robert Doty analysed catalogues and documentations of other exhibitions, he asked colleagues to suggest names of possible artists to feature in it and he considered some submission made by artists who had heard about the imminent show. Doty travelled all over the country to see the recommended artists, but according to some of them, during his studio visits he was only looking at the artworks that were familiar to him or that had been recommended by other collaborators. Doty’s knowledge of African American art was insufficient to be the curator of the exhibition and his search for something new appeared limited⁷⁶. As in the case of *Harlem on My Mind*, there were protests from some artists who did not attend the opening and staged a march in front of the museum trying to boycott the

⁷⁵ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 7- 80.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

exhibition. It was also issued a press release by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC)⁷⁷ which affirmed that for *Contemporary Black Artists in America* to genuinely embody the concept of black experience, the selection of artists had to be made by someone with a sensitivity to black people, so basically, by an African American person⁷⁸. Similar observations were made during the recent 2018 protests by the Decolonize This Place movement, which protested the controversial hiring of a white woman, Kirsten Windmuller-Luna, as the curator of the African art collection at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. This is another example of the denial to black people to control their own narratives⁷⁹.

Protests for *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition brought the withdrawal of nearly one-third of the selected artists, but the exhibition was inaugurated anyway. The exhibition presented to the public the works of fifty-six African American artists coming from the major cities of the country and included younger artists such as Howardena Pindell and Evelyn Terry together with established artist like Jacob Lawrence and Charles White and the works were partly figurative and partly abstract. It seemed that the only nexus among all the artists was that they were African American⁸⁰.

⁷⁷ BECC was a group of African American artists created in 1969 as a response to the *Harlem on my Mind* exhibition which excluded the contributions of black artist. The aim of the coalition was to promote change in the major art museums in New York in terms of increasing the curatorial and artists presence of African Americans.

⁷⁸ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 151-152.

⁷⁹ For the protests concerning the hiring of a white curator for the Brooklyn Museum's African art collection, the movement uploaded a video on YouTube with the opening scene of the film *Black Panther*, already mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, which basically recreates the situation at the Brooklyn Museum, i.e., a white curator managing an African art collection. The use of this scene manifested the lack of inclusive policies within the museum, challenging the museum's authority and questioning its character as an inclusive and democratic institution. In addition to this intervention, Decolonise This Place made some demands on the Brooklyn Museum, such as the formation of a decolonisation commission within the museum and the diversification of the staff. See <https://decolonizethisplace.org/bk-museum> [last access 8 June 2022].

⁸⁰ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 151-152.



Figure 8, Michele Wallace (center) and Faith Ringgold (right), Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) protest at the Whitney Museum, New York, January 31, 1971, photograph © Jan Van Raay

In fact, this was basically the curatorial strategy applied in order to incorporate African American artists in major museums such as the Whitney which was mounting a “black art show”, thus an exhibition hosting exclusively African American artists. The use of this format by the Whitney and the choice of a white director with little knowledge of the subject demonstrated the weakness of this type of exhibitions which were seen by the artists as a modality of misrepresentation of their works. Furthermore, Doty privileged abstract works in his catalogue essay and in the exhibition’s layout, following the trend of the time. On the one hand the artists were shown separately from their white colleagues but at the same time their work was assimilated into a dominant art historical trend. This contradiction demonstrated that the intention to include African American art in the Whitney Museum was in fact still a form of segregation⁸¹. In general, after the civil rights movement black artists started to be considered for exhibitions in major institutions in the country. Many other shows were organized in those years, but the presence of black artists was mostly a form of tokenism, in other

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 8.

words, a symbolic action of including an underrepresented group of people to give the appearance of racial equality⁸², a practice that even today's museums need to be careful about.

2.1.2 The parallel art circuit created by the African American community

While major museums like the Met or the Whitney were organizing their exhibitions, black artists had been creating their own spaces of expression for years; New York City has been the place of opportunities for this. One of the most influential spaces was the Studio of Arts and Crafts, founded in 1933 by the sculptor Augusta Savage. The Studio was basically a leisure centre dedicated to art and a school for professional training which shaped influential artists like Jacob Lawrence. In 1939, another venue was opened by Savage, the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, which became an important showcase for the artworks of Savage's former students. The studio of Charles Alston and Henry W. Bannarn called "306" was another significant space opened in 1934 with the same ambition of Savage's studios to create opportunities for African American artists to express themselves through art and also to feel a sense of belonging to a community that wanted to make the difference in improving the status of black people⁸³.

Another key space was the Studio Museum in Harlem, which opened in 1968 as the first museum in the United States to be founded to exhibit the works of African Americans and other minorities. The idea for the museum was already conceived in 1965 by an interracial group of educators, artists, philanthropists, art collectors and other figures. The purpose of the Studio Museum was to create a space for black artists to show their works and meet other black talents but most of all, the museum was to be a place of encounter between black and white art⁸⁴.

New York City was not the only place where the black artists community felt the necessity to fight for their place in the artworld and in society at large: in Chicago, the art collective AfriCOBRA was established in 1968 and in Los Angeles, some black

⁸² <https://www.lexico.com/definition/tokenism>

⁸³ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 3-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

artists formed Studio Z (early 1970s). Both initiatives wanted to overcome the exclusion of black artists in the country's art system.

In 1977, the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, was the first African American museum of art, history, and culture to be entirely supported by a state. Its creation was the result of many years of activism and campaigning undertaken by the members of the community and their founders. The fact that the State of California decided to sustain such a project is very significant as it meant that the African Americans contribution in developing American West's culture, economy and politic was recognized⁸⁵.

The museums, institutions and collectives mentioned above are thus a response to the institutional negligence and indifference that the black community was experiencing. On the one hand black artists witnessed the impact they had in creating a parallel art system that slowly gave them the possibility to emerge and get noticed even by major institutions (even considering the threat of tokenism), on the other hand the realities created by African American artists for African American people raise a question that is well posed by the historian and art critic Maurice Berger : “Are African American artists stifled by the segregation of black museums, or do these institutions allow their art to flourish despite the dominant culture's lack of interest?”⁸⁶.

It is also important to keep in mind that the birth of all the institutions devoted to African American artists in those years was for sure fundamental and pioneering in beginning a process of change in terms of visibility for black artists and the creation of opportunities, but at the same time this parallel black art world tended to reiterate a dynamic of segregation.

Moreover, the tendency of major north American museums was to leave the work of representing and exhibiting emerging black artists from the beginning of their careers to African American museums and institutions, until they had reached their full potential and only to see them as an opportunity to invest in⁸⁷.

⁸⁵ <https://caamuseum.org/about/mission-and-history-of-caam> [last access 24 March 2022].

⁸⁶ M. Berger, *Are Art Museums Racist?*, in “Art in America”, 31 March 2020 (first published September 1990); <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/maurice-berger-are-art-museums-racist-1202682524/> [last access 24 March 2022].

⁸⁷ T. Li, *An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S Art Museum*, in “Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal”, vol. 30, 19 September 2021, p.795-825, p. 806.

This was true for the past, but it applies to the present too. Berger reflects on the responsibility of institutions toward society: “To what extent does the mere existence of African American museums unintentionally absolve majority institutions of their social responsibility to black Americans?”⁸⁸.

2.1.3 The current visibility of African American artist in USA museums

Recent research conducted by Artnet analyses the current situation in terms of the visibility of African American art in museums and its evaluation. In 1992 the Whitney Museum proposed a Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospective that was eventually cancelled, and no other museum was interested in hosting such an exhibition whereas in 2017 a Basquiat painting was sold for 110.5 million dollars, becoming the most expensive work produced by an American artist ever sold at auction⁸⁹. This example testifies that there have been many changes in the consideration of African American works but according to the analysis of some data it appears that since 2008, just 2.37 percent of all acquisitions and donations and 7.6 percent of all exhibitions at thirty prominent American museums have been of works by African American artists. These data are particularly relevant if we consider that more than twelve percent of the US population is represented by African Americans among which many are producing extremely stimulating and recognised art⁹⁰. Some examples are Mark Bradford and Martin Puryear who have represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, respectively in 2017 and in 2019 while Simone Leigh represented the country in this year edition of the Venice Biennale, 2022, also winning the Golden Lion. Their presence at such a globally important contemporary art event is very telling as a sign of change.

Other signs of renewal include that in 2017 the number of solo and thematic exhibitions dedicated to African American artists jumped almost 66 percent compared to the previous year (the number of exhibitions dedicated to African American artists reached 63, up from 38 in 2016) and only in the first nine months of 2018, African

⁸⁸ M. Berger, *Are Art Museums Racist?* <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/maurice-berger-are-art-museums-racist-1202682524/> [last access 24 March 2022].

⁸⁹ J. Halperin, C. Burns, *African American Artists Are More Visible Than Ever. So Why Are Museums Giving Them Short Shrift?*, in “artnet News”, 20 September 2018; <https://news.artnet.com/the-long-road-for-african-american-artists/african-american-research-museums-1350362> [last access 24 March 2022].

⁹⁰ Ibid.

American works acquired by museums jumped at 439, representing a 10-year record in terms of museum acquisition. The research suggests that even if considerable progress has been made, black artists continue to be marginal compared to their white peers⁹¹.

The police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 and the ensuing protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement, has further ignited the debate on the responsibility of US art museum in rooting out inequality in terms of the long-established prioritizing of white Western art, the lack of diversity in staff members and the limited audience targeting of the cultural offer. In the months that followed the event, several institutions conceived specific plans to implement inclusion and diversity in their activities. *The Art Newspaper* made a survey involving twenty-two U.S museums on the progress they have made to overcome the problematics that the events have uncovered⁹².

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York is one of the surveyed institutions which received, soon after the waves of protests, a letter from the members of the curatorial department who demanded for reforms to change the discriminatory practices characterizing the working environment. A couple of months later, the museum presented an action plan that provided a senior manager with the task of implement a plan of goals over two years and drive an anti-racism debate within the Guggenheim. The museums also declared that it has prioritised diversity and inclusion in all meetings and trained staff members to anti-racism practice, as well as launching a paid internship programme⁹³.

The Baltimore Museum of Art instead, has been a trailblazer in the acquisition of African American artworks. In 2021 the museum was able to organise an exhibition entitled *Now Is the Time: Recent Acquisitions to the Contemporary Collection* which was organized by deaccessioning seven works by white male artists of its collection to create a fund to purchase artworks by underrepresented artists. The exhibition featured

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² N. Kenney, *Exclusive Survey: What Progress Have US Museums Made on Diversity, After a Year of Racial Reckoning?*, in "The Art Newspaper", 25 May 2021; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/25/exclusive-survey-what-progress-have-us-museums-made-on-diversity-after-a-year-of-racial-reckoning> [last access 24 March 2022].

⁹³ Ibid.

22 of the 125 works acquired until then and included artists such as Thornton Dial, Betye Saar and Barbara Chase-Riboud⁹⁴.

The Brooklyn Museum, besides highlighting the artistic production of black artists, it has also considered how to reach out to the city's community, as it is involved in programs to welcome diverse populations into the city such as African Americans, people of Caribbean descent, Latinos and African immigrants. The survey also involved the Los Angeles County Museum of Art which affirmed that 49% of its employees and 42% of its 57 curatorial staff members are black. In addition, it planned to share pieces from its collection and exhibition partnerships with nearby realities so that it is possible to widen the access of art to underprivileged communities. During the period of closure due to Covid-19, it offered virtual school field trips, and now it is proposing the talks programme *Racism Is a Public Health Issue*⁹⁵.

Despite these efforts, the artworld is not widely informed about the scope and quality of visual art produced by Black Americans. Indeed, the works of African Americans tend to be considered as a different category of artmaking, the "Black art". This idea is explained by the common belief that African American artists had moral and social obligations to produce art for their communities. From the time of the Harlem Renaissance to the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was very common to depict Afro-Americans in their everyday lives, in their environments as in the works of Jacob Lawrence⁹⁶.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ P. Failing, *How Top U.S Art Museums Excluded Black Artist During the 1980s: From the Archives*, in "Artnews", 14 January 2021 (first published in March 1989 with the title *Black Artists Today: A Case of Exclusion*"); <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/black-artists-exclusion-museums-1980s-1234581315/> [last access 26 March 2022].



Figure 9, Jacob Lawrence, *Pool Parlor*, 1942, watercolour and gouche on paper, 79×58 cm, © 2022 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

These types of artworks, contributed to create what many people even today think that “Black art” is. The figurative style then began to transform into a more abstract expression and many artists also started to approach assemblage and collage as a departure from these figurative modes. Many artists continued to produce artworks that contradicted that idea of black figurative art with the result that institutional support for these black artists was even more limited as in the case of black artists producing installation, video art or performance⁹⁷. Well into the 1990s the idea still persisted that African Americans were more likely to produce figurative rather than abstract art⁹⁸.

This need to generalise African American production was once again a way to create a separation between the white western canon, considered as the universal and all-comprehensive one, and that produced by black artists who seemed to be able to produce just one type of art that often also had to represent the struggle and the condition of the black community in society.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ S. E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration. The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016, p.114.

Interestingly, this idea of black art as a practice that was meant to be representative of the struggles of African Americans was also promoted by African Americans themselves. In particular, with the advent of the Black Arts Movement, an artistic movement that emerged in the 1960s in the United States, art was considered as a functional, collective, and committed medium. However, rather than serving as a catalyst promoting diverse artistic expression, the Black Arts Movement began to dismiss all forms of cultural production by African Americans that did not conform to the movement criteria. The aesthetic promoted by the Black Arts Movement was based on the notion that art should be political, have an ethical dimension and being comprehensible for the masses thus, it could not be complex or abstract. These limitations given by the movement were quite restrictive with the result that it dismissed and devaluated the works of many black artists because they were for example too abstract or did not overtly address a radical politics⁹⁹. According to Hooks therefore, limiting aesthetics within black communities also contributed to marginalise black artistry:

Whenever black artists work in ways that are transgressive, we are seen as suspect, by our group and by the dominant culture. Rethinking aesthetic principles could lead to the development of a critical standpoint that promotes and encourages various modes of artistic and cultural production¹⁰⁰.

Today, this view of black art as an art confined only to a certain style or content still survives.

New York gallerist Michael Rosenfeld, who has a great experience in showing African American artists, asserts that even in recent years curators are mainly interested in narrative works showing the black experience to represent black America. According to him indeed, the indication that a change is in act is when art institutions are interested in prime abstract works by African American artist¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ B. Hooks, *An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional*, in “Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry”, vol. 1, 1995, pp. 65-72, here pp. 67-68; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4177045?seq=1> [last access 7 June 2022].

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰¹ R. Kennedy, *Black Artists and the March Into the Museum*, in “New York Times”, 28 November 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html> [last access 26 March 2022].

It goes without saying that the artistic output of African Americans has always been very heterogeneous. Already with examples of veteran artists such as Sam Gilliam or Glenn Ligon it is possible to see the variety of artworks. Sam Gilliam is considered among the most important active abstract artists today. The artist gained critical attention during the '60s and he is known today for his experimental exploration of materials and especially for his “drape” paintings which consist of removing the canvas from the stretcher and painting it, thus creating artworks that are simultaneously painting, sculpture and installations. These works are characterised by improvisation as they can be hung differently every time they have to be installed. In 2021, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Florida hosted the exhibition *Sam Gilliam: Selections* which featured artworks by artist from the early 1970s to 2010¹⁰².



Figure 10, Sam Gilliam, 10/27/69, 1969, acrylic on canvas, installation dimensions variable, approximate installation dimensions: 355x 470 x 40 cm, Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, photography by Fredrik Nilsen Studio

Glenn Ligon is a New-York based artists who has explored American literature, history and society through his works. Ligon is best known for his text-based paintings,

¹⁰² Sam Gilliam: Selections, in The Ringling official website; <https://www.ringling.org/events/sam-gilliam-selections> [last access 26 March 2022].

a series started in the late 1980s and influenced by the speech and writings of 20th century cultural figures¹⁰³.

In 2011, the artist exhibited his works at the Whitney Museum of American Art during his first mid-career retrospective titled *Glenn Ligon: America*. The exhibition included approximately one hundred works including painting, photography, prints, drawings, sculptural installations, and neon reliefs¹⁰⁴.



Figure 11, Glenn Ligon, *Rückenfigur*, 2009, neon and paint, 61 x 369 x 10 cm, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, © Glenn Ligon

The younger generations produce a diversified and rich production as well. Moreover, it seems that it is easier now for young black artists to emerge in the contemporary art world and they are increasingly gaining presence in museums and weight in the market

¹⁰³ Glenn Ligon, Biography; <http://www.glennligonstudio.com/biography> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹⁰⁴ Glenn Ligon: America, in Whitney Museum of American Art official website; <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/glenn-ligon> [last access 27 March 2022].

with respect to artists who began their career just a generation ago and are receiving the attention they deserve only in the present¹⁰⁵.

Titus Kaphar is one of them. Born in Chicago in 1976 he now lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut. His artistic production consists of paintings, installations, and sculptures in which he often tries to represent the possibility of rewriting the history of representation. His works have been featured in many solo exhibitions in museums such as the Detroit Institute of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, The MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum¹⁰⁶.

In the artwork *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, the artist superimposes the figure of the United States president Thomas Jefferson (author of the Declaration of Independence which stated the equality of all human beings) with that of Sally Hemings, a black woman who was a slave of the president. The portrait of the president seems to fall of the frame revealing the presence of the woman, comparing the two subjects as a challenge to the narrative of the so-called “benevolent” founding father¹⁰⁷.

The second piece, *From a Tropical Space*, presents a scene of two black mothers with their empty prams as their children have been removed from the canvas. The artwork seems to suggest the fear that mothers feel for their children of living in a society that is toxic and dangerous for black people life. This anxiety of the mothers culminates into the absence of their children while the use of vibrant colours creates a sort of surrealist scene which increases the sensation of tension and threat that the painting suggests¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁵ R. Kennedy, *Black Artists and the March into the Museum*, in “New York Times”, 28 November 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹⁰⁶ Titus Kaphar Bio, in Kaphar Studio website; <https://www.kapharstudio.com/about/> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹⁰⁷ V. L. Valentine, *National Portrait Gallery: Titus Kaphar and Ken Gonzales-Day Explore ‘UnSeen’ Narratives in Historic Portraiture*, in “Culture Type”, 2018; <https://www.culturetype.com/2018/03/28/titus-kaphar-and-ken-gonzales-day-explore-unseen-narratives-in-historic-portraiture-in-new-national-portrait-gallery-exhibition/> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹⁰⁸ D. Cameron, *Titus Kaphar: From a Tropical Space*, in “The Brooklyn Rail”, November 2020; <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/11/artseen/Titus-Kaphar-From-a-Tropical-Space> [last access 27 March 2022].



Figure 12, Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014, oil on canvas, 150 x 86 x 17 cm, © Titus Kaphar



Figure 13, Titus Kaphar, *From a Tropical Space*, 2019, oil on canvas, 233 x 183 cm, © Titus Kaphar

Amy Sherald is one more example of the visibility of African American artists. In 2016 she was the first woman and the first African American to win the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition grand prize¹⁰⁹, which celebrates excellence in the art of portraiture that best tells the American story. Sherald exhibited her works in many major institutions like the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington¹¹⁰.

Amy Sherald's portraits celebrate the multiplicity of Black identities by depicting common people, whom the artist meet in public spaces like the subway, or whom she meets through her friends, trying to capture their inner lives and create a sort of connection with the viewer. Besides ordinary people, she also created a portrait for former First Lady Michelle Obama in 2018¹¹¹.

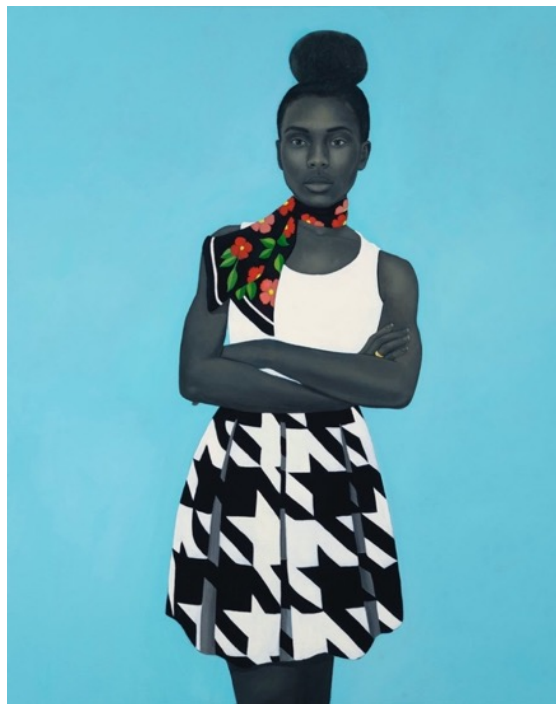


Figure 14, Amy Sherald, A Clear Unspoken Granted Magic, 2017, oil on canvas, 137 x 109 cm, © 2017 Amy Sherald

¹⁰⁹ The Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition is a competition open to artists who are working and living in the United States, and it is centered on portraiture made in a variety of media (including painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, textiles, video, performance, and time-based media). The winners receive a money prize that varies depending on the winner's placement. The winner of the first one receives the commission to portray a remarkable living American for the National Portrait Gallery's collection. In addition, all finalists' works form a major exhibition held at the Portrait Gallery; <https://portraitcompetition.si.edu/competition/> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹¹⁰ Amy Sherald; <http://www.amysherard.com/about> [last access 27 March 2022].

¹¹¹ Amy Sherald on painting "everyday people", in CBS Sunday Morning Youtube Channel, 18 October 2019; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuF3NxX-ACC> [last access 27 March 2022].

The cases mentioned above are only some of the numerous African American artists who have established themselves in the art system and gained recognition. They are the evidence of the slow process of change, started from the Harlem Renaissance, that has brought the inclusion of black artists into the art system. However, the situation has improved as the result of the many efforts of black artists, collectives, curators or pioneering museums such as the Studio Museum in Harlem that over the decades have created spaces that previously did not exist for the black community or that were extremely marginal but fundamental for self-determination and resistance to white hegemony. Yet, data speak for itself: there is still a disparity between white and African American artists. The threat is still the tokenism of African American artists especially during Black History Month when they are asked to talk about racism and black community struggles, overshadowing the artistic quality and the professional profile of the artists.

As the current director of the Studio Museum in Harlem Thelma Golden affirms when talking about African American art:

What we need to continue to understand is that the exhibition and collection of this work is not a special initiative, or a fad, but a fundamental part of museums' missions — and that progress is not simply about numbers, but understanding this work, in the context of art history and museum practice, as essential¹¹².

According to Thelma Golden too, the inclusion of African American artists in museums still has a long way to go despite progresses. Art institutions would need to continue make efforts in building continuous programmes to exhibit the works of African American artists and include them in the collections as an indispensable part of their cultural heritage.

2.2 The question of Blackness in Italy: between invisibility and hypervisibility

2.2.1 Blackness: an extraneous condition to Italy

¹¹² R. Kennedy, *Black Artists and the March into the Museum*, in “New York Times”, 28 November 2015; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html> [last access 27 March 2022].

As discussed in the previous chapter, the removed colonial experience of Italy has shaped our present primarily in the way people perceive themselves in relation to otherness. In particular, the experience of the colonies in Africa and the politics of the Fascist era have contributed to the construction of an Italianness based on the exclusion and the racialisation of the black community. Nowadays, we must deal with this anachronistic idea of Italian identity.

The death of George Floyd at the hands of the police outraged the whole world. Plenty of Black Lives Matter protests broke out across the United States and around the world. In Italy, in addition to black Italians who gathered in squares of cities across the country protesting against the brutality of racism against the black community, many white Italians as well took part in these protests in name of the Black Lives Matter movement. There was a general mobilisation for the cause in the country, supported by the media, influential people, and cultural institutions too. This solidarity was mainly shown through social media with the sharing of specific hashtags or the popular black square even by many people who would normally never share content about racism.

This unexpected impetus for anti-racist justice on the part of white Italians could not but raise questions for the black Italian community. Angelica Pesarini, an Afro-Italian scholar who focuses her studies in the intersections of race, gender and identity in colonial and post-colonial Italy, talking about that situation tried to find the answer to the obvious question that probably many black Italians wondered, namely: Why has the death of an Afro-American man aroused such a strong sense of indignation and demand for civil rights for black people in Italy whereas the same solidarity has not been demonstrated with protests against the many black people who are victims of racism in the country?¹¹³. Pesarini recalls some of the numerous cases in Italy, including that of Emmanuel Bonsu, a 22-year-old Ghanaian boy who was subjected to the racist police violence when in 2008 he was mistaken for a drug dealer's lookout in a park in Parma, while he was waiting for the start of the night school he was attending. Emmanuel was released after an unlawful custody of four hours during which he was stripped, beaten and insulted. A more recent case is that of Soumaila Sacko, an

¹¹³ A. Pesarini, *Questioni di privilegio. L'Italia e i suoi George Floyd*, in "Il Lavoro culturale", 6 June 2020, <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/questioni-di-privilegio/angelica-pesarini/2020/> [last access 2 March 2022].

exploited labourer and trade unionist who fought for the human rights of the people in the same condition as him, who was killed in 2018 while he was helping two comrades to take materials from an abandoned factory in order to build a shack in the San Ferdinando ghetto, in Vibo Valentia, Calabria, where they were living¹¹⁴.

These are just a few examples of two different stories associated, however, by the fact that the protagonists are all victims of actions with a racial prejudice at the base; so why were we so shocked by that episode of systemic racism in the United States, but we do not admit the existence of the same dynamics towards the black community in Italy?

According to Pesarini: “Perhaps it is easier to identify blackness in Italy as an alien, transitory, external condition, not belonging to this country because to be Italian, the 'real' ones, you must be white and therefore, if blackness does not exist, neither does racism”.¹¹⁵

It is precisely this perception of blackness¹¹⁶ as an extraneous condition to the country that is central to the lives of black people in Italy. Since blackness is perceived as something that does not naturally belong to the country, there is not even an awareness of what the Italian black community is.

Justin Randolph Thompson, an American artist living between the United States and Italy, affirms that the Italian black community is an ensemble of many different cultures, different provenances, and historical contexts that is not at all recognised in its complexity, but is rather often standardised only to the situation of contemporary migrations, ignoring the fact that African people have always been present in the country¹¹⁷. In this regard, Black History Month Florence (BHMF), an association founded in 2016, in Florence, with the aim of exploring African and Afro-descendant

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Forse, è più facile identificare la nerezza in Italia come una condizione aliena, transitoria, esterna, non appartenente a questo paese perché per essere italiani, quelli “veri”, si è bianchi e dunque, se la nerezza non esiste, non esiste neanche il razzismo”. Ibid.

¹¹⁶ From H. Merrill’s book *Black Spaces*, p.ix: Blackness is an assigned value as extrinsic to Western society but central to categorize the modern Western binaries identity distinguished in white or black. Manifest in historical processes such as enslavement and colonialism, blackness has been assigned largely negative value as symbol of crime and pathology. However, especially in more recent times, blackness is embraced in black social life as a source of pride, creativity, resistance, and counterculture.

¹¹⁷ F. Giannini, *Justin Thompson (Black History Month Florence): Parlare di Africa e colonialismo non significa cancellare la storia italiana ma arricchirla*, in “Finestre sull’Arte” , 17 July 2020; <https://www.finestresullarte.info/interviste/parlare-di-africa-e-colonialismo-aricchire-storia-italiana-intervista-justin-thompson> [last access 3 March 2022].

cultures in the Italian context, of which Thompson is co-founder and director, launched a project in 2020 in partnership with the Uffizi Galleries to make people reflect on the past relation between Italy and Africa through art¹¹⁸. The project entitled *On being present: Recovering Blackness in the Uffizi Galleries*¹¹⁹, is a virtual exhibition consisting of two volumes that demonstrate the African presence in some of the very well-known masterpieces on display in both the Uffizi Galleries and the Galleria Palatina in Palazzo Pitti¹²⁰.

The project started while Thompson was conducting research in order to find depictions of black people in paintings, sculptures. The pivotal moment in Thompson's research was the discovery that Alessandro de' Medici, the first Duke of Florence, was of partial African descent. About this discovery Thompson said: "This really opened up my mind to that moment of history and brought out an acknowledgement that Black Africans have been present throughout history in Florence"¹²¹.

On being present involved Renaissance art experts who had never dealt with the black presence in art, allowing for a reinterpretation of art history¹²².

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ It is possible to see the exhibition through the official website of the Uffizi galleries: volume I (www.uffizi.it/mostre-virtuali/on-being-present#) and volume II (www.uffizi.it/mostre-virtuali/on-being-present-2).

¹²⁰ La presenza dell'identità nera nelle collezioni degli Uffizi, in Gallerie degli Uffizi official website; <https://www.uffizi.it/news/articolo-blackhistorymonth> [last access 3 March 2022].

¹²¹ J. R. Thompson, *Artist and curator explores Black history in Florence, Italy*, by Katie King, in "The Bowdoin Orient", 19 February 2021; <https://bowdoinorient.com/2021/02/19/artist-and-curator-explores-black-history-in-florence-italy/> [last access 3 March 2022].

¹²² F. Giannini, *Justin Thompson (Black History Month Florence): Parlare di Africa e colonialismo non significa cancellare la storia italiana ma arricchirla*, in "Finestre sull'Arte" online, 17 July 2020; <https://www.finestresullarte.info/interviste/parlare-di-africa-e-colonialismo-aricchire-storia-italiana-intervista-justin-thompson> [last access 3 March 2022].



Figure 15, Cristofano dell'Altissimo, *Ritratto di Alchitrof*, 1552-1568 ca., oil on panel, 60x45cm, Uffizi Galleries, Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi

In addition, the involvement of an institution such as the Uffizi Galleries is very crucial as it represents the museums of Western art canons par excellence, therefore the action of reading its collection with a different perspective was very meaningful. What was also essential for BHMf was the fact of agreeing with the museum on a project that did not run out in a short time but was the basis for lasting researchers over the years¹²³. This is paramount because as Thompson stated:

A great number of institutions think that their work is finished simply with an exhibition about Africa. It doesn't work like that: as with all exhibitions, if we do an exhibition with a certain reflection and never come back to that reflection, we haven't done a great job. An exhibition should be able to turn into research and create a deeper reflection¹²⁴.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴“Tante istituzioni pensano che il loro lavoro sia finito semplicemente con una mostra sull’Africa. Non funziona così: come per tutte le mostre, se facciamo una mostra con una certa riflessione e non torniamo mai più su quella riflessione, non abbiamo fatto un grande lavoro. Una mostra dovrebbe essere in grado di trasformarsi in una ricerca e di creare una riflessione più profonda”; Ibid.

This project made possible the emergence of the black presence in the museum's collection and made it clear that the narrative of our country can be analysed from different perspectives to reach the construction of a more complete and truthful history with respect to the traditional one. Knowing the full story is crucial to understand some of the historical relations between Italy and Africa and the consequences they have in the present. Moreover, the first volume of the exhibition had such a great reception (it had more than 270,000 views, making it the most 'visited' 2020 virtual exhibition in Italy) that the second volume was also promoted¹²⁵.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer, during a TED Talk in 2010 talked about the danger of a "single story" which for her means showing people repeatedly as a single thing until those people become that single thing¹²⁶.



Figure 16, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie during *The danger of a single story* TED Talk, 2010

The narration of the "single story" depends on the power which is the ability to tell the story of another person and make it the definitive one¹²⁷. The project *On being Present* exactly attempted to go beyond the narration of a single story, in the specific case of art history, to reveal its incompleteness.

¹²⁵C. Cola, *On Being Present. Gli Uffizi (ri)scoprono la cultura africana nelle proprie collezioni*, in "ArtsLife", 23 February 2021, <https://artslife.com/2021/02/23/on-being-present-uffizi-cultura-africana-collezioni/> [last access 16 May 2022].

¹²⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, TED Talk, 2010; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg> [last access 8 March 2022].

¹²⁷ Ibid.

2.2.2 The representation of blackness through the media

The media, such as television or cinema, have contributed particularly to the construction of the black identity over the years. Italy has in fact often included black people in advertisements or movies, but in a stereotypical and offensive way, already since the middle of the last century. An example from the 1960s is the movie *Totòtruffa 62* (1961), which resorted to the use of the black face and the stereotypical representation of the African person. Totò, the leading actor, impersonated indeed the African ambassador of a fake country, painting his face black, wearing an Afro wig and a nose-ring. Another case from the 1970s is that of the Italian-Eritrean actress Zeudi Araya, who became famous as “the moon-skinned girl” after starring in Luigi Scattini's film *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* (1972), which was her gateway into the world of Italian cinema. In the movie, Araya plays the role of Simoa, a girl living in the Seychelles who seduces a married white man attracted by her. In the subsequent films in which the actress was featured, she always played specific roles such as the exotic beauty, the longing woman that leads men into temptations or the prostitute. This black feminine body fetishization was also typical in colonial times when colonised women were seen as usable objects to possess and willing to satisfy the man. For what concerns the male representation, they have always been depicted as the caricatured role who is not able to speak Italian properly or the simpleton and foolish character. During the 1980s instead, the advertising of some candies, Tabù candies¹²⁸, was very popular on television. This product was presented by a man who resembled the actors of the Minstrel Shows¹²⁹ with Afro facial features emphasised in a grotesque manner. These stereotyped representations are unfortunately still present in Italian television

¹²⁸ These Tabù sweets are just one example of Italian commercial products that suggest racist and stereotypical narratives of the peoples of the African continent. Another example similar to the Tabù candies is the Assabese liquorices. The name of this product is linked to the Turin General Exhibition of 1884, during which the inhabitants of the Eritrean city of Assab were displayed as the most interesting attraction of the exhibition. This practice of ethnic display was widespread throughout Europe from the second half of the 19th century. See G. Abbattista, *Africani a Torino. La rappresentazione dell'altro nelle esposizioni torinesi (1884-1911)*, in *Le esposizioni torinesi, 1805-1911: specchio del progresso e macchina del consenso*, edited by U. Levra, R. Rocca, Torino: Archivio Storico Città di Torino, 2003. Unfortunately, these liquorices are still on sale in Italy and retain the same name. This makes us reflect on the unremarked colonialism in commercial products and thus also in the media, and the power they have in conveying messages and ideologies.

¹²⁹ The Minstrel Shows were shows in which white American actors masked themselves to represent black people and interpret very offensive and racist sketches.

and very often Afro-descendant actors are asked to play specific roles such as the pusher, the bouncer, the driver or the ignorant immigrant for men and the prostitute or the domestic worker for women¹³⁰.

The same problematic portrayal applies to news broadcast on television and in newspapers, especially to crime news where often the first aspect highlighted is the origin of the criminal. The ethnicization of news has consequences for people who share the same ethnicity as those committing the crime. The risk is that an association is made between the criminal of a certain ethnic group and all the other people who belong to that ethnic group.¹³¹

As Obasuyi states:

Television and film media have the power to shape people's perceptions of society, which is why responsibility in the way black bodies are represented is important if we are to aim for an effective deconstruction of stereotypes and roles wrongly attributed to black people in Italy in real life¹³².

These dynamics of depicting black people through clichés contribute to create the “single story” that estranges us from the truth from which Adichie warn us.

2.2.3 Citizenship: a question of blood and merit

Black presence in the country is extremely multifaceted but we do not have the perception of that. There are Afro- descendants who are in Italy for professional reasons or to attend university in the country, people fleeing from war in their country or coming to find perspectives for a better livelihood, daughters and sons of these people who moved in Italy as children or were born in the country just like as the children of white Italians but despite this, they are still labelled as foreigners rather than compatriot. Many of these 'foreign' children, for example, have never even visited their parents' country of origin, nor do they know its language and traditions. Being born and raised in Italy, they are one hundred percent culturally Italian but not enough

¹³⁰ O.Q.D. Obasuyi, *Corpi estranei. Il razzismo rimosso che appiattisce le diversità*, Gallarate: People, 2020, pp. 31-38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-71.

¹³² “I mezzi televisivi e cinematografici hanno il potere di plasmare la percezione che le persone hanno della società, motivo per cui la responsabilità nella modalità di rappresentazione dei corpi neri è importante se si vuole puntare a una decostruzione effettiva di stereotipi e ruoli erroneamente attribuiti alle persone nere presenti in Italia nella vita reale”, *Ibid.*, p.39.

to be accepted as such. This situation creates a sense of disorientation and confusion about their identity¹³³.

Igiaba Scego asserts in the book *Future* that indeed the nation does not recognize black bodies as part of it. Rather, they are caught in the middle of the consciousness of not being migrants like their parents, but of not being sufficiently Italian because of their origins proved by their black skin¹³⁴.

As a matter of fact, these children of migrations are not considered compatriot neither for the current Italian law, which grants citizenship according to *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) which means that anyone born of an Italian mother or father is automatically Italian¹³⁵. Therefore, a person is considered Italian not because it was born in the country but rather because it has Italian blood running through its veins¹³⁶. It is obvious that such a law creates itself a racial division and thus an exclusion of a part of the population.

In 2017, a proposed citizenship reform law arrived in Parliament. The reform would have allowed all children born in Italy to foreign parents, with at least one parent holding a long-term residence permit, to obtain Italian citizenship. The same would have applied to children arrived in Italy before the age of twelve and had completed one or more education cycles for five years; or to young people who arrived in Italy before the age of eighteen and had successfully completed a school or vocational cycle and had been resident in Italy for at least six years¹³⁷. The new reform was not approved eventually and besides the missed opportunity to make things better, this failure also underlines the desire to maintain a retrograde idea of Italianness, reminiscent of the Fascist era, which differentiates the “real Italians” from the “foreigners”.

It seems that Italian citizenship is something that must be deserved. Eloquent is the case of the two children of Egyptian origin, Adam El Hamami and Ramy Shehata, who

¹³³ H. Merrill, *Black Spaces. African Diaspora in Italy*, New York – London: Routledge, 2018, p.68.

¹³⁴ I. Scego, *Note della curatrice*, in *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, edited by Igiaba Scego, Firenze: Effequ, 2019, pp. 9-17, here p.11.

¹³⁵ Law n.91, 5 February 1992, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1992/02/15/092G0162/SG> [last access 8 March 2022].

¹³⁶ C. Hawthorne, A. Pesarini, *Making Black Lives Matter in Italy: a Transnational Dialogue*, in “Public Books”, 12 November 2020; <https://www.publicbooks.org/making-black-lives-matter-in-italy-a-transnational-dialogue/> [last access 9 March 2022].

¹³⁷ N. Uyangoda, *L'unica persona nera nella stanza*, Roma: 66thand2nd, 2021, pp. 83-84.

obtained the citizenship in 2019, after they made a heroic gesture. The two children were on a bus together with their schoolmates when they realised that the driver wanted to set fire to the bus but Adam and Ramy managed to call the police in time to foil the massacre¹³⁸. The fact that they were considered Italians by the State only after their brave action is quite sad. Citizenship should not be something that must be gained through spectacular actions, it should rather be the right of a person to obtain it beyond what it has done in its own life¹³⁹. However, as long as the law will give more value to the blood, things will never change.

It would be useful for all of us to reflect on what it means to be Italian and why the experience of white Italians would be different from that of those without Italian blood in their veins. As the Italian writer, Nadeesha Uyangoda says, feeling Italian is a completely personal experience. A person who claims to be Italian because its ancestors have been Italians for generations does not feel Italian in the same way as a person, born and raised in Italy by foreign parents feels, but it does not mean that its version of Italianness is less authentic or valid than the person who has been Italian for generations¹⁴⁰.

Living in a society which is an all-white environment and promotes deviously racist and exclusionary dynamics, makes the foreign person, in Uyangoda's words, "the only black person in the room" which means being the only person representing a minority in a privileged white environment, and what identifies you is first and foremost your skin tone, name or even clothing.

2.2.4 The need of decolonising Italian language

The problem of sensitize Italians on issues of race and discrimination towards the black community is also related to the language, in particular to the lack of proper terms to talk about these topics. Benjamina E. Dadzie, an Italian-Ghanaian anthropologist, is part of a black collective that, with the aim of decolonizing the Italian language, is developing critical vocabularies to allow black minorities to express their condition of

¹³⁸ O.Q.D. Obasuyi, *Corpi estranei. Il razzismo rimosso che appiattisce le diversità*, Gallarate: People, 2020, p. 105.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ N. Uyangoda, *L'unica persona nera nella stanza*, Roma: 66thand2nd, 2021, p.86.

discomfort in words. For this reason, Dadzie and her collective are working to adapt some concepts and words, such as “blackness” or “white privilege¹⁴¹”, which exist in the English language and other languages of countries which have a more solid debate on racism¹⁴².

It is indeed pivotal to implement an adequate vocabulary to describe certain issues both for whites, in order to increase awareness of these issues and thus sensitizing people, but above all for black people so that they can feel represented and taken into account also through a language that recognises their underprivileged condition. As long as the proper words do not exist to talk about these issues, the problems remain hidden too.

The complication of correct terminology also lies in the way one tries to define black people. In the Italian language it is extremely common the expression *di colore* (of colour) to indicate black people in a way that seems to sound more polite instead of using the term *nero* (black) considered coarse and offensive. In this regard, in a YouTube video on the *Afroitalian Souls* channel, three young Afro-Italians guys: Bellamy Ogak, cultural curator, activist and co-founder of the *Afroitalian Souls* project, the singer David Blank and Loretta Grace, actress, content creator and activist discussed about this topic with a hint of irony. They explain that the right term to use for dark-skinned people is not *di colore* but simply *nero*, which is not an offense. “People of colour...What colour? If I am of colour, so are you. [...] Because if you consider yourself white and refer to everybody else as of colour, then you are basically saying you are colourless. But guys, white is a colour too!”¹⁴³.

¹⁴¹ From H. Merrill in *Black Spaces*, p. xxiii: White privilege involves the ideologies, social policies, and mindset associated with white domination over nonwhite people based principally on physical characteristics and ancestry. White privilege and white supremacy create racial segregation and restricts meaningful citizenship rights to a privileged group of whites.

¹⁴² S. D'Ignoti, *Black women in Italy weren't being heard. Then Black Lives Matter protests began in the United States*, in “The Lily – The Washington Post”, 6 July 2020; <https://www.thelily.com/black-women-in-italy-werent-being-heard-then-black-lives-matter-protests-began-in-the-united-states/> [last access 10 March 2022].

¹⁴³ “Di colore...di che colore? Se sono di colore io, lo sei anche tu. [...] Perché se tu ti ritieni bianco e chiami tutte le altre persone di colore, vuol dire che tu ti stai definendo una persona che è senza colore. Ma ragazzi, il bianco è un colore!” *Razzismo in Italia? La verità! Nero, N*gro o di colore?* in *Afroitalian Souls* YouTube channel, 14 March 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Lyq1ep5T4Y&t=235s> [last access 10 March 2022].



Figure 17, from the left: Bellamy Ogak, David Blank and Loretta Grace, *Afro Italian Souls* video *Razzismo in Italia? La verità! Nero, N*gro o di colore?*, 2016, still image

Despite that, we, as white people, never feel the need to identify with skin colour as it is almost unconsciously considered the standard, whereas we need to emphasise the blackness of people which is yet another way of creating dissimilarity and therefore marginalisation, continuing to fuel an idea of Italianness that excludes blackness.

The phenotypic characteristic associated with Afro-descendant individuals are therefore what seems to make their presence in a social environment evident, determining their hypervisibility and at the same time, their very appearance makes them invisible in the eyes of society.

2.2.5 The Afro-Italian artistic community: a dynamic reality

Black Lives Matter has in a sense created a short parenthesis where Afro-Italians have had the chance to make their voices heard on critical issues like racism, but also on problems of underrepresentation and exclusion from the art field. These topics are often dismissed as a foreign problem, mainly linked to the US context and its massive Afro-American component. The fact is that also in Italy we have a considerable community of Afro-descendants demanding visibility, and Black Lives Matter manifestation have helped to highlight the marginality of the Afro-Italian experience compared to the powerful African American one. The United States undoubtedly have one of the largest Afro- descendent communities in the world (besides Brazil), they have experienced significant collective mobilisation over history and their activism has inspired the whole world, but it should be recalled that it all started from Europe

and its yearning of power¹⁴⁴. Therefore, when we think of the underrepresentation of Afro-descendant people as a more serious problem in the US, we should try to keep in mind our responsibilities as Europeans.

The urgent question is when will Afro-Italians be freed from their condition of invisibility and instead gain recognition as active members of the country's culture and society?

Even if unnoticed by many, the Afro-Italian community is very strong and active especially in the contexts of the arts and activism.

For example, *Afroitalian Souls*, the above-mentioned initiative, is a digital platform dedicated to Italian Afro-descendants, also active on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, designed exactly as a response to the condition of invisibility of black people in the eyes of Italian institutions, society and traditional media. Their mission is to tell their story for themselves, ranging from talking about arts and entertainment to beauty and style, without the filter of the white gaze which has built a negative perception of black people¹⁴⁵. In the same direction goes *GRIOT*, a collective and cultural magazine founded in 2015 which wants to celebrate the contemporary culture, arts, music and style of Africa, its diasporas, and cultural contaminations¹⁴⁶.

The literary scene is extremely rich too. Igiaba Scego represents one of the most influential Afro-Italian writers who boasts a very rich literary production besides her journalistic activity. Abdou Mbacke Diouf is a molecular biologist and professional volleyball player who has been writing novels since 2017 or Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, a writer and activist, who debuted in 2019 with her first book *E poi basta. Manifesto di una donna nera italiana* in which she tells the difficulty of being a woman and black in a society that for these reason obstacles young women like her. Takoua Ben Mohamed, cartoonist and graphic journalist, is another successful example of the

¹⁴⁴ C. Hawthorne, *Prefazione*, in *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, pp. 21-32, here pp.30-31.

¹⁴⁵ Missione, in Afro Italian Souls official website; <http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/afroitalian-souls-about-us/> [last access 10 March 2022].

¹⁴⁶ G. Muscatelli, *Johanne Affricot, chi è la fondatrice del magazine culturale GRIOT*, in "Harper's BazaarItalia" online, 17 June 2020; <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/it/cultura/opinioni/a32889672/johanne-affricot-chi-e/> [last access 11 March 2022].

use of creativity to talk about relevant themes concerning social and human rights such as Muslim women, xenophobia and refugees¹⁴⁷.

If the literary scene is very rich, the music one is remarkably active with artists who stand out for their talent such as Ghali, Tommy Kuti, Epoque or Mahmood, to name but a few, who once again use their art as a channel of expression for critical issues relating to our country. Recently, in 2018, NoOx Worldwide was founded as the first Italian record company which is supporting and sustaining emerging Afro-Italians musicians. The founder, Silvia Nocentini, affirms that the purpose of the company is to integrate these artists in the Italian music scene, which is not completely ready for the Afro-urban sound of their musicians, but precisely for this reason it is important to make this music known in order to foster the knowledge of it and of its cultures and traditions¹⁴⁸.

Another project worth mentioning is Wariboko, created by Charity Dago, an Italian-Nigerian image consultant and talent manager, who founded an agency for the scouting, representation, and promotion of Italian Afro-descendant artists in the specific area of cinema, entertainment, art, fashion, and web presence¹⁴⁹.

The above cases are just a few examples of Afro-Italian people and initiatives that have managed to make their way and emerge in a country that tends to make “foreign bodies” invisible and is not fully inclined to include diversity. However, these successful examples are a sign of a change of course.

Nevertheless, it is not sufficient since black people still struggle to enter and be represented in Italian cultural environments. On top of that, spaces for expression and the initiatives are mostly self-organized but as Johanne Affricot, founder and director of *Griot magazine*, affirms: “The world of culture and art should sit down with us Afro-descendant Italians and Italians of other origins and together discuss what we can do to improve our present”¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁷ D. Ambrosio, *Takoua Ben Mohamed, la fumettista italo-tunisina che lotta contro gli stereotipi razzisti*, in “Elle”, 5 February 2022; <https://www.elle.com/it/magazine/women-in-society/a38298468/takoua-ben-mohamed-libri/> [last access 11 March 2022].

¹⁴⁸ *La prima società discografica per musicisti afro-italiani*, in “Africarivista”, 29 May 2021; <https://www.africarivista.it/la-prima-societa-discografica-per-musicisti-afro-italiani/186062/> [last access 11 March 2022].

¹⁴⁹ Vision, in Wariboko official website; <https://www.wariboko.eu/vision/> [last access 11 March 2022].

¹⁵⁰ “Il mondo della cultura e dell’arte dovrebbero sedersi con noi italiani afrodiscendenti e italiani con altre origini e insieme discutere cosa si può fare insieme per migliorare il nostro presente.” G. Muscatelli, *Johanne Affricot, chi è la fondatrice del magazine culturale GRIOT*, in “Harper’s Bazaar

In 2021, Netflix produced an Italian tv series entitled *Zero*, inspired by Antonio Dikele Distefano's novel *Non ho mai avuto la mia età*. The tv series is set in the suburbs of Milan, a place rich in different underrepresented cultures. The protagonist is Omar (Zero), an Italian teenager with Senegalese origins who wants to escape from his difficult neighbourhood to pursue his dream of becoming a cartoonist. He is very shy to the point of feeling almost invisible. However, he will realize that he has a special superpower which is precisely invisibility. With the help of his friends from the *Barrio*, the quarter where he and his friends live, Zero learns how to control his superpower and use it to protect the neighbourhood threatened by acts of vandalism of a criminal. Zero and his friends soon discover that behind all this there are the economics interests of an estate agency that wants to send away the people of the Barrio. The fault of the degradation of the quarter will of course fall onto its residents who, coincidentally, are all members of ethnic minorities.

In the first episode *Zero*, conscious of the fact that his appearance precedes him with common prejudices he says: "The pusher, the hawker... Is it better to be mistaken for what you are not or not be seen at all?"¹⁵¹.



Figure 18, P.Randi, I.Silvestrini M. Ferri, M. Hossameldin, *Zero*, 2021, Fabula Pictures/Red Joint Film for Netflix

This doubt expressed by Zero is representative of the condition of many Afro-Italians in Italy, where simply the fact of being black is the reason for their hypervisibility accompanied by specific preconceptions, but also the cause of their invisibility and therefore their marginalisation from different aspects of social life.

Italia" online, 17 June 2020; <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/it/cultura/opinioni/a32889672/johanne-affricot-chi-e/> [last access 11 March 2022].

¹⁵¹ "Lo spacciatore, il vucumprà...Meglio essere scambiato per quello che non sei o non essere visto affatto?" Episode 1, *Zero*, Fabula Pictures, Red Joint Film, Netflix, 2021.

Eventually in the series, the invisibility of the protagonist becomes the winning feature to solve the troubles of his neighbourhood, but in real life it is necessary to remedy this condition by recognising the presence of Afro-Italians and sharing with them the spaces of expression as, from the examples we have seen above, it is evident that the black community has a lot to say and to offer in the arts.

2.3 The representation of Afro-Italian artists in contemporary art museums and outside the museal institution: a mapping of cultural projects in Italy

Art institutions are now considered to have made great strides when it comes to issues such as the inclusiveness of minorities, allowing them to enter the dominant Western art system as major players. Nevertheless, as already pointed out during this dissertation, some institutions still struggles to pay attention to social instances.

The art curator Marco Scotini indeed affirms that:

Our model of art is very similar to that of a majority institution capable of determining either the integration of minorities into the majority (into identity) or their exclusion. By belonging to it, we merely refer to a totalitarian assignment of power, to the idea that only one world is possible, to a monolingualism without proliferation, without differences. Understood in this way, and once extended on a global scale, art continues to be based on autonomy and ahistoricism, continues to reproduce the classical dialectic of integration-exclusion¹⁵².

This dynamic of determining integration or exclusion also applies to the Italian art system. This is anachronistic, especially if we consider the complex social fabric of the country characterised by the multiethnicity to which we should by now be accustomed.

The research in this paragraph focused on analysing the inclusion of Afro-Italian artists in the major Italian contemporary art museums.

¹⁵²“Il nostro modello di arte è molto simile a quello di una istituzione maggioritaria in grado di determinare o l’integrazione delle minoranze nella misura maggioritaria (nell’identità, nell’unità) oppure la loro esclusione. Appartenendovi, non facciamo altro che rinviare ad un’assegnazione totalitaria del potere, all’idea che un solo mondo sia possibile, ad un monolinguismo senza proliferazioni, senza trasversalità, senza differenze. Così intesa, e una volta estesa su scala globale, l’arte continua a fondarsi sull’autonomia e sull’astoricità, sull’universalità e sull’autenticità. Continua a riprodurre (sempre e sistematicamente) la dialettica classica integrazione-esclusione”; M. Scotini, *Arte e curatela nella geografia del potere*, in *Utopian Display. Geopolitiche Curatoriali*, edited by M. Scotini, Macerata: Quodlibet NABA Insights, 2019, pp. 13-18, here p.16.

The results of this research showed that there is inclusion in institutions, but it is relegated to a few cases. Moreover, the absence of academic research on this specific topic is further evidence that there is not enough awareness of the problem and therefore also interest in these artists. On the other hand, there is a livelier representation of Afro-Italian artists by organisations and projects outside the museum space, but often these spaces are created by the people of the Afro-Descendant community themselves.

With these premises, the following paragraph will present some significant exhibitions, events and projects involving Afro-Italian artists both within and outside contemporary art museums.

2.3.1 Francis Offman's abstract painting in Italian institutions

2.3.1.1 *Nuovo Forno del Pane* project at MAMbo Museum

The first example that is worthy to mention is the case of Francis Offman, an Italian artist with Rwandan origins who is very active in the Italian contemporary art panorama.

One museum in which he has been represented is the Museum of Modern Art of Bologna (MAMbo) on the occasion of the project *Nuovo Forno del Pane*. The museum opened in 2007 in the historical site of the former *Forno del Pane* building (Bread Bakery) and with the occasion of the re-opening of the museum after the pandemic, MAMbo launched the project *Nuovo Forno del Pane* (New Bread Bakery) as a symbol of rebirth. The idea is to transform the role of the museum into a production centre converting a specific section of the building, *Sala delle Ciminiere*, into a production and creativity space available to the creative community of the city to support the restarting of a sector severely affected by Covid-19 like the artistic one. In May 2020, the museum launched an open call addressed to artists resident or domiciled in Bologna who did not have a studio to offer them a space in the museum to work in¹⁵³. After a process of artist selection, the museum chose a group of twelve artists,

¹⁵³ MAMbo, *Press release*, 4 May 2020, pp.1-4, here pp. 1-2; http://www.mambo-bologna.org/files/documenti/archiviocomunicati//CS_Nuovo_Forno_del_Pane_OK.pdf [last access 5 April 2022].

including Francis Offmann, with different origins, age, and expressive languages. In addition to the possibility for the artists to have a space to continue their artistic research and projects and to share the experience with their colleagues, the museum has designed a programme of studio visits, workshops, and meetings for the public. In the video interview of the *Videoritratti* series, realised by the museum and dedicated to the presentations of the artists participating in the project, Offman explains that he finds inspiration for his works from the African continent in general but especially from the Rwandan genocide of 1994. He also stresses the importance of the materials used, which are mostly donated to him, allowing the artist to get out of the studio and have contact with the people who donate their materials, thus making them in some way part of the creation of his works. Other materials are found and selected by the artist when they have a specific value for him. One material he says he often uses in his artistic production is coffee, a typical product of his home country which represents for him a way of feeling close to Rwanda.¹⁵⁴

2.3.1.2 The acquisitions of the Castello di Rivoli Museum

Another museum that demonstrated interest for the artistic production of the artist is the Contemporary art Museum Castello di Rivoli in Turin whose collection has been enriched in 2021 with two artworks from Offman¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵⁴ *Nuovo Forno del Pane. Videoritratti. Francis Offman*, MAMbo Youtube channel, 28 February 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHDRMxNCuI8> [last access 5 April 2022].

¹⁵⁵ Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Castello di Rivoli, *Press release*, 2021; <https://www.castellodirivoli.org/comunicato/2021-al-castello-rivoli/> [last access 5 April 2022].



Figure 19, Francis Offman, Untitled, 2021, ink, paper, linen, coffee grounds, Bologna gypsum on 100% cotton, linen, 232 x 272 cm, Castello di Rivoli Museum



Figure 20, Francis Offman, Untitled, 2021, Acrylic, ink, coffee grounds, 100% cotton, Bologna gypsum on linen, 214 x 146 cm, Castello di Rivoli Museum

Castello di Rivoli Museum also curated the exhibition, *Painting in Person. The new Collection of Fondazione CRC*, held from November 2021 to 7 March 2022 in the Monumental Complex of San Francesco in Cuneo. The event presented a selection of

the Fondazione CRC's contemporary art collection and new commissions specifically realized for the spaces of San Francesco church by some young artists, including Francis Offman, who were invited not only to exhibit their works but also to intervene on the temporary freestanding walls created in occasion of the event¹⁵⁶.

Offman's intervention consisted of painting one of the walls with a technique he had developed involving a combination of coffee and gypsum. Intervening in the creation of the exhibition space was, as the artist affirmed, a way of taking possession of the space, of constructing it as if it were a personal laboratory. The works displayed on his painted wall were created during the period of the first lockdown due to the pandemic that coincided with the period of turmoil in the United States as a consequence of George Floyd's death. His works reflected this difficult period and were a way of exorcising what was happening¹⁵⁷.



Figure 21, Francis Offman, *Painting in Person* exhibition view, San Francesco church

2.3.1.3 The representation of Francis Offmann outside the museum: Baleno International and P420 galleries

In addition to the MAMbo project, the exhibition curated at Castello di Rivoli and being part of its collection, the artist has been present in several solo exhibitions but, in this case, outside the museum circuit.

¹⁵⁶ *Painting in Person. The new Collection of Fondazione CRC, press release;* <https://www.castellodirivoli.org/comunicato/pittura-persona-la-nuova-collezione-della-fondazione-crc/> [last access 5 April 2022].

¹⁵⁷ *Pittura in persona* Francis Offman, in Castello di Rivoli Youtube channel, 3 December 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wi2D-riPzI4&t=58s> [last access 5 April 2022].

There are two recent important solo exhibitions held in contemporary art galleries. The first one held at Baleno International gallery in Rome, from 10 April to 22 May 2021. The curator Davide Ferri talking about the artistic production of Offman declared that:

Offman's paintings are undoubtedly abstract. But they can make vague allusions to landscape (with certain yellows, browns and greens that suggest the vitality of the earth, or certain blues that are wedged into things like fragments and portions of sky and waterways), but there is nothing – a horizon line, a reference to definite figures – that can really characterise them as such. Let's put it this way: Offman's works are abstract, but for me they seem to evoke, though without description, the image of an exuberant and contrasted landscape, a landscape of continuous movements, tremors and telluric subversions¹⁵⁸.

The other solo exhibition was held at the P420 art gallery in Bologna from 9 October 2021 to 8 January 2022. On this occasion, curator Simone Frangi described the artist's work as abstract art from which the artist's personal experience shines through and that it is far from the artistic language of the masters of the past, stating that:

The abstraction with which Offman is engaged in painting seems to immerse itself, without intention, in a visual training the artist has experienced in life: weaves of banana leaves, monochrome mixtures of dung, architectural forms and designs, emerging in a Rwanda of the memory. The abstract in which Offman is involved takes its distance from the jargon encoded by the Western masters in our history books¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁸ Davide Ferri, *Francis Offman Portfolio*, P420 Gallery, 2021;
http://www.p420.it/frontend/files/artisti/Offman/Portfolio_ENG.pdf [last access 5 April 2022].

¹⁵⁹ Simone Frangi, *Francis Offman portfolio*, P420 Gallery, 2021;
http://www.p420.it/frontend/files/artisti/Offman/Portfolio_ENG.pdf [last access 5 April].

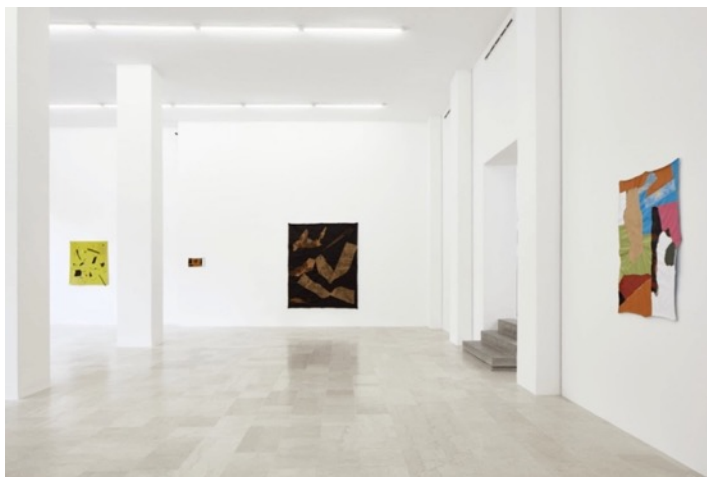


Figure 22, Francis Offman, installation view, 2021, P420 gallery, Bologna, source: P420 gallery official website

2.3.2 The Mudec: a museum with an intercultural outlook

Another significant effort made by an Italian museum to include Afro-Italians is the Museo delle Culture (Mudec) in Milan, opened in 2015 to host and present to the public the municipal ethnographic collections. After five years, the museum has felt the necessity to reflect on its role and responsibilities as ethnographic museums in the contemporary society. The museum has thus reorganized its permanent collection naming it *Milano globale. Il mondo visto da qui* which offers the story of the city intertwined with major historical global processes. The collection allows visitors to deal with particularly critical topics such as colonialism or globalization and is divided into five sections starting from the Modern Age until the contemporary era. The last two rooms are the most interesting for the research of this thesis as they present an analysis of the migration flows which involved the city from the second half of the 20th century until present day. In the fourth section the visitor can see a video installation with some interviews in which the protagonist are people belonging to the Lombard communities of diasporic origin. These installations aim to create a more empathetic comprehension of the migrant condition. Even most interesting is the last room, which is a contemporary art space dedicated, for the moment (this room will be modified over time to represent other international communities

living in Milan), to Afro-descendants creatives and their identity bounded with the contemporary global city of Milan¹⁶⁰.

In this section there is *Privileges* by the artist Marzio Emilio Villa which is a photographic series of portraits that combines specific definitions of discriminating terms with photographic portraits. Starting with texts by Franz Fanon, Angela Davis or Michelle Alexander, the artist has explored a terminology, from the English language, that describes discrimination in its various forms, trying to represent it in the form of photographs¹⁶¹.

The photographic work thus, seeks to explain our society through the privileges of discriminatory practices expressed by specific terms selected by the artist such as racial fetishism, white fragility, or blackface. In front of the series, the spectator is obliged to deal with these discriminatory practices that dominate our societies, reflect on the condition of privilege, and try to get rid of it to promote equality¹⁶².



White Fragility,
and gender roles

Les personnes blanches des sociétés occidentales ont grandi et vivent dans un environnement qui les protège de tout stress lié à leur couleur de peau. La définition de DiAngelo de la fragilité blanche est : « Un état dans lequel même un minimum de stress racial devient intolérable, déclenchant une série de mouvements défensifs. Ces mouvements comprennent l'extériorisation d'émotions comme la colère, la peur et la culpabilité, et de comportements comme l'argumentation, le silence et l'abandon de la situation induite par le stress. Ces comportements, à leur tour, servent à rétablir l'équilibre racial des Blancs ».

Figure 23, Marzio Emilio Villa, portrait from *Privileges* series, 2021, photography, © Marzio Villa

¹⁶⁰ Collezione permanente. Milano globale. Il mondo visto da qui, in Mudec.it; <https://www.mudec.it/ita/collezione-permanente-2021/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶¹ L. Tsatsas, *Privilège: le racisme à notre porte*, in “Fisheye”; <https://www.fisheyemagazine.fr/decouvertes/images/privilege-le-racisme-a-notre-porte/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶² *Privileges*, in Marzio Villa website; <https://www.marzioemiliovilla.com/privileges.html> [last access 6 April 2022].

The Mudec is very receptive towards the problematics of contemporary society. For seven years, the museum organizes the project *Milano Città Mondo*, held in Spazio delle Culture Khaled al-Asaad, a cultural space dedicated to the archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad who has dedicated his career to the protection of the Palmira cultural heritage¹⁶³. The project is addressed to the whole citizenry and offer a programme of various activities like exhibitions, conferences, workshops, and courses. The idea of the initiative is to create a space for intercultural dialogue that fosters the knowledge of the different cultures living in a multi-ethnic city like Milan, by actively involving citizens belonging to these cultures as well¹⁶⁴.

In the last edition of 2021, *Nuovi sguardi sulla partecipazione*, it was also held a conference dedicated to the decolonization of the museums where guests such as Giulia Grechi (anthropologist), Kibra Sebhat (journalist and producer), Silvia Iannelli (museum anthropologist) and Roberto Pinto (independent curator and art historian) discussed together about the problem of colonialism surviving in contemporary museums¹⁶⁵.

The 2022 edition will be held from 31 March to 14 July 2022, and it is titled *Identità globali. Nuovi archetipi di cittadinanza*. It will explore important topics, especially for younger generations, such as citizenship rights, self-representation and fluid, international and diasporic identities¹⁶⁶.

2.3.3 The case of MAXXI museum

2.3.3.1 *The African Metropolis. An imaginary city exhibition*

Over the years, the MAXXI museum in Rome has demonstrated attention towards the artistic production of Afro-Italians artists through numerous events. The *African Metropolis. An imaginary city* exhibition is one of them. The exhibition was held in

¹⁶³ <https://tavolomudec.wordpress.com/2015/10/28/dedicato-a-khaled-al-asaad-lo-spazio-delle-culture/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶⁴ Milano Città Mondo; <https://www.mudec.it/ita/milano-citta-mondo-3/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶⁵ *Remix. Nuovi Sguardi sulla partecipazione*, press release, 2021, p.11; https://www.mudec.it/ita/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/07/MCMREMIX_ProgrammaWeb_A4_pagSINGOLA-4_bassa.pdf [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶⁶ *Identità Globali. Nuovi archetipi di cittadinanza*, 2022; <https://www.mudec.it/ita/milano-citta-mondo-3/> [last access 6 April 2022].

2018 and curated by Simon Njami, writer, art critic and curator of Cameroonian origins. The purpose of the show was to sensitise people to the fact that Africa is not exactly as we are used to imagine it. As the artistic director of the MAXXI Hou Hanru asserted talking about the exhibition:

This time it is no longer, or at least not only, about a series of exotic stereotypes ranging from its wild condition to its savage 'beauty', from the heart of darkness of colonialism to modern human disasters and dramas. This time it is about Africa's new life, brimming with economic and social developments. Despite all sorts of difficulties, Africa is today mostly perceived - besides being a major supplier of raw materials - as the next 'market of the future' in the global economy. [...] Africa is a vast continent, characterised by profound cultural diversities, different histories, and realities. The problem is how to bring these multiple 'Africas' together in 'one city': there is no 'Africa', but 'Africas'¹⁶⁷.

As well as being an opportunity to show the African continent from a different perspective, according to Giovanna Melandri, president of the MAXXI foundation, the project was also the chance for the museum to meet and collaborate with the African communities of Rome. Indeed, the idea was to involve young people from different part of the continent or second generations as protagonists of an intense activity of mediation where they could interpret the artworks from their personal experience¹⁶⁸. The exhibition featured more than 100 works by 34 African artists who recreated the multifaceted nature of contemporary African identity and global transformations through different medium such as sculpture, installation, photography, textile, and videos¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁷ “Questa volta non si tratta più, o almeno non solo, di una serie di stereotipi esotici che spaziano dalla sua condizione selvatica alla sua “bellezza” selvaggia, dal cuore di tenebra del colonialismo, ai disastri e ai drammi umani moderni. Questa volta si tratta della nuova vita dell’Africa, che trabocca di sviluppi economici e sociali. Malgrado difficoltà di ogni sorta, oggi l’Africa è perlopiù percepita – oltre che come uno dei principali fornitori di materie prime – come il prossimo “mercato del futuro” dell’economia globale. [...] L’Africa è un continente vastissimo, caratterizzato da profonde diversità culturali, storie e realtà differenti. Il problema è come riunire in “una sola città” queste molteplici “Afriche”: non esiste l’“Africa”, ma le “Afriche”; H. Hanru, *African Metropolis. Una città immaginaria. Siamo pronti?*, press release, 2018; https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/MAXXI_AfricanMetropolis_CartellaStampa.pdf [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.



Figure 24, *African Metropolis. An Imaginary city*, exhibition view, 2018, © Musacchio, Ianniello & Pasqualini

Among the artists on show there was Délio Jasse, who was born in Angola but living and working in Milan. His artistic language is photography in which he usually uses materials like family albums or found passport photos to explore the concept of memory. Besides developing his own printing techniques, Jasse experiments with analogue photographic printing processes like cyanotype, platinum or the Van Dyke Brown technique. He then proceeds with creating variants in the photographs using painting, gold-leafing, or collage¹⁷⁰.

The work exhibited in occasion of *African Metropolis* was *Cidade em movimento*, a work from the series of the same name representing his hometown Luanda. About this series the artist stated:

Luanda is an exercise of memory. Being away for a long time has created different images of this metropolis in my mind. The images of a remembered Luanda and the new images of the city are standing in front of my eyes and my camera. It's crowded, chaotic, surfaces and spaces merge together. Post-colonial history overlaps with the past and with a new and fast history of progress. These layers really interest me, not just as physical entities but also as memories and visions¹⁷¹.

His interest in the concept of memory stems from the lack of information or the narration of history that is not complete or properly told. With his photographic work

¹⁷⁰ Délio Jasse biography; <http://deliojasse.com/Biography> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁷¹ *Delio Jasse-Cidade em movimento*, in edcat.net; <https://edcat.net/item/cidade-em-movimento/> [last access 6 April 2022].

he tries to add what is missing to a partial narration reconstructing it through objects or photos that are given to him or that he finds in flea markets¹⁷².



Figure 25, Délio Jasse, from *Cidade em movimento* series, 2016, Cyanotype emulsion on fabriano paper, © Délio Jasse.

2.3.3.2 Silvia Rosi: a finalist of the *MAXXI BVLGARI Prize* project

MAXXI is also demonstrating its propensity for inclusiveness with the *MAXXI BVLGARI Prize*, now in its third edition in 2022. The project was born out of a partnership with Bulgari with the aim of supporting and promoting young artists to bring them onto the international scene.

A group of Italian critics and curators composed of Valentina Bruschi, Gaia Di Lorenzo, Eva Fabbris, Simone Frangi, Pier Paolo Pancotto, Gea Politi, Paola Ugolini and Eugenio Viola prepared a list of eligible artists from which an international jury choose three finalists: Alessandra Ferrini, Namsal Siedlecki and Silvia Rosi, an Italian artists born in Scandiano (RE) to Togolese parents¹⁷³.

The contest is very prestigious as the finalists are chosen by an eminent international jury which was composed for this edition of Hoor Al Qasimi (President and Director

¹⁷² L. Costa, *Delio Jasse. Arquivo Informal*, in “Juliet”, 8 January 2021; <https://www.juliet-artmagazine.com/delio-jasse-arquivo-informal-2/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁷³ *MAXXI Bvlgari Prize 2022*; <https://www.maxxi.art/en/events/maxxi-bvlgari-prize-2022/> [last access 6 April 2022].

Sharjah Art Foundation United Arab Emirates), Chiara Parisi (Director Pompidou-Metz), Dirk Snauwaert (Director WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels), with Hou Hanru (Artistic Director MAXXI) and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi (Director MAXXI Arte). The finalists will exhibit their site-specific works from 24 June 2022 at MAXXI and in October 2022, the jury will nominate the winner whose work will be acquired by the museum¹⁷⁴.

The fact that an Afro-Italian artist was initially selected to take part in the competition and was then also chosen as a finalist proves that the artistic practice of Afro-Italian artists has achieved greater visibility. In addition, the possibility for her to have a work acquired by the museum, would be a great achievement and a first step towards greater attention to the country's Afro-descendant artists and perhaps an example for other museums as well.

Silvia Rosi works and lives between London and Modena and in an interview on GRIOT she affirms that she decided to move to London when she was eighteen as she was struggling as a young black woman in Italy where her identity was constantly put in question for examples by strangers asking her why she spoke Italian so well. Conscious of her difference, she decided to move from one hand to find opportunities, from the other, to find a place where to enjoy diversity and not being noticed for her appearance¹⁷⁵.

In her artistic this personal experience returns as she uses photography, texts, and video to explore thematic such as diaspora, identity, citizenship and belonging. She is particularly interested in self- portraits in which she retraces the history of her family. She uses embodiment of her family's members as a way of comprehending her own history, her identity as child of migration raised in a different country with respect to the one of her family¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ *Silvia Rosi Among the Finalists of The MAXXI BVLGARI Prize*, 12 January 2022, in "Griot"; <https://griotmag.com/en/silvia-rosi-among-the-finalists-of-the-maxxi-bulgari-prize/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

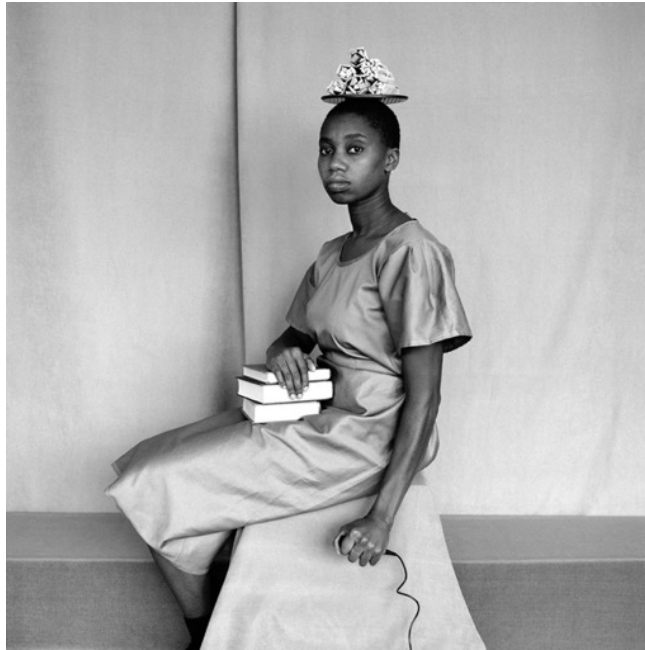


Figure 26, Silvia Rosi, *Self portrait as my Mother in school uniform*, 2016, photography, © Silvia Rosi

Her work takes inspiration from the aesthetic of the West African Studio portraiture celebrated by famous photographer like Mali's Malick Sidibe or Ghana's first female professional photographer Felica Abban or more recent Ruth Ossai, a successful artist in fashion photography. According to Rosi, photography has a strong performative element. Like in Western studio portraiture there is a set, objects, the subjects of the photo that are a sort of actors and a director, namely the photographer¹⁷⁷.

The result is an image of dignity and pride which is how the subject of the photograph will be remembered. [...] But the reality is different, there are more complex dynamics, so in my work I perform in the opposite way. I show the ugliest part of my family, the suffering and the struggles that brought us here¹⁷⁸.

2.3.3.3 An online project to sustain the Black Lives Matter movement: the #MAXXIforBlackLivesMatter

The *African Metropolis* exhibition and the Rosi case for the *MAXXI Bulgari Prize* represent the willingness of the institution to listen to the demands of today's society.

¹⁷⁷ E. O. Sumba, *Silvia Rosi Is Inverting the Classic West African Studio Portrait to Retell Her Family's History*, in "Griot", 8 July 2020; <https://griotmag.com/it/people-fotografia-silvia-rosi-ritrattistica-in-studio/> [last access 6 April 2022].

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Even after the tragic event of the George Floyd's death and the subsequent protests, the museum, in addition to demonstrating its closeness to the cause by sharing the Black Square in its Instagram feed, as many other institutions have done, it also launched an online project that ran from 10 June to 15 June 2020 through social media, the #MAXXIforBlackLivesMatter, with the aim of raising awareness and consciousness of the Black Lives Matter movement through art¹⁷⁹. The project was also presented as an online event on its webpage which is still visible.

The museum selected eight specific works which for the MAXXI were particularly eloquent about the global problem of racism. The project was certainly an interesting and timely initiative, but it had one major drawback: the artists selected were mostly Afro-descendent people but none of them were Afro-Italians. Precisely because MAXXI wanted to support the cause underlying the globality of the problem, it would have been more impactful if some Afro-Italians had been able to make their contribution and shed a light on the Italian situation. This is once again eloquent of the fact that Afro-Italian artists, despite some sporadic efforts, suffer of lack of visibility and inclusivity when it comes to representation in art institutions.

However, one specific work selected could be representative of Italy, *The Freedom of movement*. This is a three-channel video installation produced by the two Berlin-based artists Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani and commissioned and co-produced by MAXXI. The work recalls the 1960 Olympic marathon in Rome when the Ethiopian marathon runner Abebe Bikila won the African continent's first gold medal. Bikila run the marathon barefoot and became a symbol of the rebirth of Africa and its progressive emancipation from colonialism. The video also features a group of people representing today's migrants and refugees running among the monuments of the capital city. This run symbolize their right to move freely in the spaces of the city intended as the possibility and the right to freely restart their lives in another country. In the video there is also the chorus of the Emmaus School of Maenza running towards the

¹⁷⁹ MAXXI for Black Lives Matter. Against Racism; <https://www.maxxi.art/en/events/maxxi-for-black-lives-matter/> [last access 7 April 2022].

*Colosseo Quadrato*¹⁸⁰ and singing a revisited version of the sentence carved in the façade of the building¹⁸¹.

The video is set in Italy, more specifically in Rome and therefore there is a clear reference to the Italian situation and at the same time the people running across the city can symbolize the general condition of migrants and diasporas people who want to feel free to be part of the country.



Figure 27, Nina Fischer and Maron el Sani, *Freedom of Movement*, 2017, three-channel video installation, 9:45', Photo © still from video

2.3.4 Outside the museal space

The poor representation of Afro-Italians in museums means that artists find opportunities somewhere else. Johanne Affricot (founder and director of the cultural magazine Griot) confirms the delay of the country in recognizing the existence and artistic quality of black Italian artists and also underlines the lack of dedicated physical spaces in the Italian cultural landscapes. She mentions some successful international cases like the aforementioned the Studio Museum in Harlem which is still very active and probably the most prestigious point of reference for African American artists and in general for artists of the African Diaspora. As for Europe, in London there is the Autograph ABP art space established in 1988 featuring the photography and film by

¹⁸⁰ See pp.18-19, first chapter.

¹⁸¹Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani. *Freedom of movement*, 2017; <https://www.maxxi.art/en/events/maxxi-for-black-lives-matter/> [last access 5 April 2022].

artists focused on issues of race, representation and social justice. In Berlin, the Cameroonian art curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung founded the Savvy Contemporary space in 2009 with the aim of exploring colonialities power and the consequences of this in history, geographies, gender and race while in Paris there was an independent venue called *La Colonie* opened in 2016 but forced to closed in 2020 due to the pandemic, whose mission was to reflect on decolonisation and be a cultural and visibility point of reference especially for minorities¹⁸².

Talking about the necessity of having a dedicated space in Italy, Affricot underlined that:

Even if for most it will seem like a form of ghettoization to close ourselves up in a space that is meant to focus mainly on Afro-descendant artists and artists with other cultural backgrounds, I assure you that it is not. Rather, it is a process for which, in my opinion, it is important to pass through, because the levels of knowledge and thought regarding certain issues, stories (whether individual or collective) and dynamics, beckon for this need and responsibility¹⁸³.

2.3.4.1 Black History Month Florence: a dedicated space to Afro-Italianness

Some virtuous examples of physical space dedicated to the representation of Afro-descendant people are present in Italy as well, Black History Month Florence (2016), already mentioned above, is for sure one of the most active associations in this sense. Since its creation it has curated in collaboration with other organizations and institutions throughout Italy and beyond numerous exhibitions, seminars, workshops, and residencies focused on African and Afro-descendant cultures. In September 2021, Black History Month Florence inaugurated The Recovery Plan, its own physical space based in Florence which is a black cultural, research centre and a space for hosting art, performance, lectures and educational programme aimed at exploring the historic relation between Italy and Africa. In addition, the centre has created over the years a network with Italian Afro-descendent communities, cultural institutions, and universities abroad with the purpose of nourishing an archive and library for the study of Afro-descendent cultures¹⁸⁴.

¹⁸² J. Affricot, *Black Lives Matter and the Delay of the Italian Art Sector with its black Italian Artists*, in “Griot”, 9 June 2020; <https://griotmag.com/en/black-lives-matter-the-delay-of-the-italian-art-sector-with-its-black-italian-artists/> [last access 1st April 2022].

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ <http://blackhistorymonthflorence.com/our-mission/> [last access 7 April 2022].



Figure 28, View of The Recovery Plan space, Florence, photo credits: Marco Badiani

The projects that will be presented below well represent the mission of the association like *Italian Beauty. Gli Eroi Dimenticati* (2020) which consisted in a collaboration between the BHMF, Vogue Italia and the Afro-Italian visual artist Jem Perucchini to celebrate the contribution and legacies left from some forgotten but important Afro-Italians figures in the history of the country. Perucchini realised four portraits representing these important persons. Giuseppina Margaret Bakhita (of Sudanese origin) who was an active Canossian religious sister in Italy for 45 years, declared a saint by the Catholic Church in 2000. Domenico Mondelli instead was the first black aviator in the world who obtained a military pilot license. Born in Eritreia, he went to Italy because an Italian Colonel, Attilio Mondelli, adopted him during the Abyssinian War. Alessandro Sinigaglia, born and raised in Fiesole by a Jewish Italian father and an African American mother fought against fascism as communist partisan and eventually Leone Jacovacci, who was born in Angola from a Congolese mother and an Italian father. He was brought to Italy at an early age so that he raised in Italy where he decided to embark on a sporting career, becoming a renowned boxer and an Italian and European champion of the late 1920's¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸⁵ J. Anderson, *Italian Beauty. Gli Eroi Dimenticati*, in “Vogue Italia”, n.835, 12 March 2020; <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/italian-beauty-gli-eroi-dimenticati-jordan-anderson> [last access 7 April 2022].



Figure 29, Jem Perucchini, *The aviator Domenico Mondelli*, 2020, oil on linen, Photo Credit: Giuseppe Macor

This project is important because it contributes to defining a more complete idea of the nation's history by talking about figures who would normally be marginalised in the narrative of Italian history. Moreover, it makes us reflect on what Italian identity is; an extremely personal experience linked to how a person has experienced the country and its culture and not simply the fact of being born in the country by white blood generations who were in turn born and raised in Italy.

Black History Month Florence collaborated many times with Murate Art District, in Florence, which is a contemporary art centre built on the former Murate Benedictine convent which then became a jail from 1883 to 1985 and finally converted into a cultural centre. The purpose of the space is to involve contemporary artists from all ages and provenience to create a space of dialogue and research in the art field. Another important mission of the cultural district is an interactive education of citizenry on contemporary issues. Indeed, besides the exhibitions, talks, conferences, and workshops organized, every month there is *Murate Art Lab* which offers free workshops to citizens who are involved in the artistic production of the artists¹⁸⁶.

Sporcarsi le mani per fare un lavoro pulito is the name of another recent exhibition in collaboration with BHMF held in 2019. The show featured six artists: M'Barek Bouhchichi, a visual, installation artist and sculptor from Morocco; Adj Dieye, an

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.murateartdistrict.it/la-struttura/> [last access 7 April 2022].

Italo- Senegalese photographer living and working between Zurich, Milan and Dakar; Sasha Huber, a Swiss-Haitian visual artist; Amelia Umuhire, a Rwandan-born video artist and filmmaker now based in Berlin; New York-based photographer, video artist and sculptor Nari Ward with Jamaican roots, and Délio Jasse¹⁸⁷.

The exhibition takes the name and the inspiration from a phrase said in an interview of 2013 by the activist Pape Diaw who worked and lived in Florence for many years. The phrase “Getting your hands dirty to do a clean job” is intended as the action that Afro-descendent people must do in Italy in order to demonstrate to be respectable human beings. This phrase inspired them to create an exhibition through which dismantling preconceptions about Afro-descendant people and about what type of art is expected from Afro-descendant artist¹⁸⁸.

Particularly significant is the presence of two Afro-Italians artists: Adji Dieye and Délio Jasse who was aforementioned for the MAXXI exhibition *African Metropolis*. Adji Dieye showed the photographic work titled *Dreamland* which is part of an ongoing series started in 2018 called *Red Fever*.

¹⁸⁷*Sporcarsi le mani per fare un lavoro pulito*, in Murate Art District official website; <https://www.murateartdistrict.it/sporcarsi-le-mani-per-fare-un-lavoro-pulito/> [last access 7 2022].

¹⁸⁸ Justin Randolph Thompson about *Sporcarsi le mani per fare un lavoro pulito*, in Murate Art District Youtube channel, 22 March 2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk8eTMp0R6A&t=44s> [last access 7 April 2022].



Figure 30, Adji Dieye, *Red Fever (Dreamland)*, 2018, micro-perforated vinyl sheet, 250 x 350 cm, Photo Credit: Martina Melchionno

This photographic project explores through photos, images and photomontages, the spread of socialism throughout Africa during the 20th century and the traces it left on the continent. Through this series Dieye tell us a little bit of this moment of history which is often disregarded when speaking about the African continent history. The artist represents an imagined communism in Africa through photomontages where there are real landscapes juxtapose with soviet blocs in the jungle, constructivist towers or monuments in the middle of the savanna¹⁸⁹.

Délio Jasse instead showed some work from *Pontus*, a series of manually tinted emulsions in which once again he creates images that speaks about his country of origin, Angola, highlighting the evolution and cultural convergences of the postcolonial country¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁹ N. Moscatelli, *Red Fever*, in PhMuseum official website; <https://phmuseum.com/adji/story/red-fever-8be25dd405> [last access 8 April 2022].

¹⁹⁰ J. G. Dieudji introduce l'opera di Délio Jasse, Murate Art District Youtube channel, 2 May 2020; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2_m1ZXhxWA [last access 8 April 2022].



Figure 31, Délio Jasse, *Pontus*, 2012, Photographic emulsion on Fabriano paper, 100cm x 70cm, © Délio Jasse.

In 2021, Black History Month Florence collaborated again with Murate Art District for the collective exhibition *Gettare il Sasso e nascondere la mano*. Once again, a phrase inspired the event but this time it was Cécile Kyenge (former Minister for Integration under Prime Minister Enrico Letta, 2013-2014) that pronounced it denouncing the fact that some Italian politicians do not take the responsibilities for their actions. The idea of the show was to present collective narratives linking Afro-descendant spirituality and rituals to education, colonial history, and its materiality to historical activism¹⁹¹.

The exhibition featured five young afro-descendant artists based in Italy namely Francis Offman, who has already been mentioned above, Victor Fotso Nyie and Binta Diaw, two artists who will be discussed as case studies in the next chapter, and then Raziel Perin and Emmanuel Yoro.

Raziel Perin was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Italy from the age of 4 years and now is working and living in Milan. His artistic language is focused on the discover of his origins and a process of reappropriation of the diasporic cultural elements of his family through different mediums like installation, sculpture, photography, painting and drawing too. He also uses organic materials and cooking

¹⁹¹ Ostinato, Black History Month Florence VI edition; <https://www.murateartdistrict.it/ostinato/> [last access 8 April 2022].

techniques of the creole tradition, he explores the voodoo spirituality, and all these elements allows him to know and connect with his Afro-descendant legacy¹⁹².

On the occasion of the exhibition *Gettare il Sasso e nascondere la mano*, he presented a series of sculptures entitled *Mami* which are small sculptures made principally of manioc. The artist affirms that when manioc is engraved, it naturally takes on an anthropomorphic form, in particular one resembling a mermaid. The idea to create this sculpture came from his research into the cult of Dominican voodoo spirits, in particular the spirit of Santa Marta who is a mermaid. He discovered that it is an African spirit called Mami Wata that has existed since the time of the slave trade in Afro-diasporic religions. In addition, Santa Marta is associated with the amethyst rock which the artist has placed in the belly of the manioc sculpture¹⁹³.



Figure 32, Raziél Perin, *Mami*, 2020, manioc, amethyst, iron, 22 x 6 x 6 cm, Photo Credit: Justin Randolph Thompson

The artist had also the occasion to have a solo exhibition titled *A Tale of Tamarindo*, in 2020 at the MA*GA museum as an event promoted by Black History Month

¹⁹² Raziél Perin in Il triangolo Art Gallery official website; <https://iltriangoloartgallery.com/artisti/raziel-perin> [last access 8 April 2022].

¹⁹³ M. Bianchesi, *Intervista a Raziél Perin in occasione di A Tale of Tamarindo*, in “Forme Uniche”, 13 January 2021; <http://formeuniche.org/intervista-raziel-perin/> [last access 8 April 2022].

Florence in which the artist presented his works from 2020 including the manioc artworks.

Emmanuel Yoro instead is a visual artist of Ivorian origin who works between Vicenza and Milan. His contribution to the exhibition *Gettare il Sasso e nascondere la mano* was the work *Gallagher*. His artistic production comprehends collage, graphic, photography, design and fashion. He creates images in which he explores the multiple facets of his cultural identity and investigates the different shades of queerness¹⁹⁴.

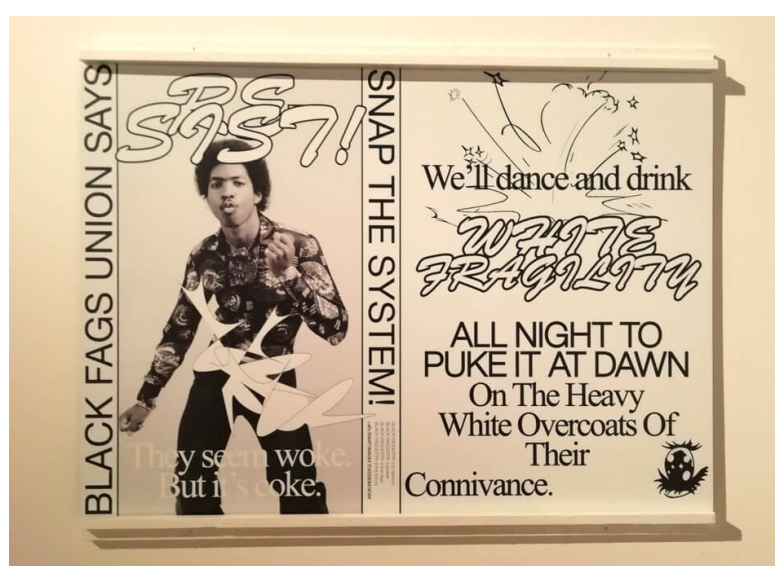


Figure 33, Emmanuel Yoro, *Gallagher*, 2020, © Emmanuel Yoro

2.3.4.2 *Mediterranea* Biennial

One more initiative focusing on inclusivity and interculturality is *Mediterranea* Biennial, founded in 1985 and organized by the *Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée*, an international association with more than fifty members and partners around Europe, Africa, and Asia. Its mission is to support emerging young creatives coming from or based in the Mediterranean and extended European territories as an opportunity to deepen cultural exchange. The Biennial also

¹⁹⁴Ostinato, Black History Month Florence VI edition, in Murate Art District official website; <https://www.murateartdistrict.it/ostinato/> [last access 8 April 2022].

aims to create opportunities for mobility and production outside the network through collaborations, trainings, and research programs¹⁹⁵.

The 19th edition, held in 2021 in the State of San Marino (Italy) was titled *School of Waters* and was focused on the Eurocentric stereotypes linked to the imagery of the Mediterranean area and try to deconstruct these clichés¹⁹⁶.

The edition featured 62 artists and among them there were three Afro-Italians artists. Besides Adjii Dieye, there were also Binta Diaw and Victor Fotso Nyie which we will discuss more in depth in the next chapter.

Dieye showed during the Biennial the work *Dreamland* from *Red Fever* series that was presented above, and then different artworks from the photographic series *Maggic Cube*.



Figure 34, Adjii Dieye, *Maggic Cube*, photography, © Adjii Dieye

The series *Maggic Cube*, began in 2015 and ended in 2019, is representative of another theme that the artist addresses in her artistic production which is the influence that

¹⁹⁵ About Mediterranea Biennial, in Mediterranea Biennial official website; <https://mediterraneabiennial.org/The-Biennale> [last access 8 April 2022].

¹⁹⁶ <https://mediterraneabiennial.org/Curatorial-Concept> [last access 8 April 2022].

advertising has on the African visual culture and in the construction of a national identity. The protagonist of this series is the stock cube, and the artist chose this specific product to critique the impact of goods imported to West Africa. Indeed, the artist affirms that while walking through Dakar, one of the cities where she lives and works, it is impossible not to bump into an advertising of the stock cube. The artist refers in her works to specific brands of this product, in particular Maggi brand, which entered the African market right after the Berlin Conference in 1885 when European powers were deciding the fate for the African continent. Since then, these stock cubes became one of the key elements of West African cuisine, earning the nickname “magic cubes”¹⁹⁷. The artist explains that:

My images repurpose the hunger-inducing reds and yellows used by brands such as Maggi and Jumbo, while their compositions reference master photographers like Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita. Combining the visual languages of food advertising and portraiture was also a way to highlight how the contemporary art economy often reduces the visual cultures of West Africa into a singular “style” – reflecting the same consumerist attitude of branding strategies toward culture. Here, a banal product such as the stock cube becomes a vehicle for a multi-layered discussion¹⁹⁸.

2.3.4.3 *Echoes and Agreements* project: the diptychs of Theo Imani

Lastly, there is another peculiar project that is worth to mention, and it is the one by Theophilus Marboah known also as Theo Imani. He was born and raised in Verona in a family of Ghanaian origin, he is a medical student at the University of Pavia, but he is very passionate about Africa and diaspora art to such an extent that he created a series of diptych on Instagram entitled *Echoes and Agreements* (2016-ongoing) in which he juxtaposed images of canonical European works of art and contemporary works, especially photography, created by people of African descent. With this research, he wants to explore the way in which the black body is represented in the Western art but above of all makes us reflect on the relation between Africa and

¹⁹⁷ E. Pierandrei, *In Conversation with Adjí Diéye. The Symbolisms of Seasoning*, in “Contemporary And (C&)”, 29 April 2020; <https://contemporaryand.com/fr/magazines/the-symbolisms-of-seasoning/> [last access 8 April 2022].

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Europe, creating through the diptychs a bridge that highlights similarities rather than differences¹⁹⁹.



Figure 35, Figure 16, Left: Caravaggio, *The Adolescent Bacchus*, 1595–97, oil on canvas, 95 × 85 cm. Right: Herbert Lang, *Portrait of Manziga, Avungura, Chief of Azande*, 1910–15, lantern slide, 8 × 11 cm, © AMNH Library

His visual research on social media has aroused so much interest that he participated in the *Pioneers of the Past* project promoted by A Vibe Called Tech, a creative agency and initiative that explores and fosters the intersections of creativity, culture, and black innovation, and Stance, an arts and culture podcast. The project was inspired by The North Face x Gucci collection which was focused on celebrating the spirit of discovery and exploration. Alongside Theo Imani, three other creatives were selected for the project: Alayo Akinkugbe, art historian and creator of *A Black History of Art* platform, Renata Cherlise, archivist and creator of the multimedia platform *Black Archives*, and critic, art historian and Tate Museum curator Osei Bonsu. The four young creatives chosen for their commitment to celebrate the black image and its representation in art and society were asked to present their self-portraits for The North Face and Gucci's collaboration, which were then to be reinterpreted by the Londoner artist Jazz Grant, known for her work celebrating the black community²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁹ S. Benaglia, *Echi e accordi. Intervista a Theo Imani*, in "ATP DIARY", 27 November 2021; <http://atpdiary.com/echi-e-accordi-intervista-a-theo-imani/> [last access 8 April 2022].

²⁰⁰ Ibid.



Figure 36, Jazz Grant, *A Vibe Called Tech x Gucci: Pioneers of the Past*. Theophilus Imani, 2021, Collage, Copyright © A Vibe Called Tech

Besides the creation of the portraits, Stance podcast enriched the project with conversations with the four creatives discussing about the changing of the black image and the presence of a new generation that wants to redefine its place in the art world and society²⁰¹.

The example of Theo Imani's visual research *Echoes and Agreements* started on social media could be inspirational for many young artists struggling to gain visibility. Indeed, new technologies today make it easier for artists to make their works known as they can progressively reach a huge audience simply by posting and talking about their art, connecting directly with a community, creating a kind of virtual art gallery. Doing it professionally would also make artists' work being noticed by institutions and art galleries that nowadays all have social profiles and are aware that social media are in a way redefining the artworld.

Examples of artists who have emerged through social media include British artist Genieve Figgis and Canadian bp laval who were posting their artworks on Instagram

²⁰¹ A. Angelos, *In collaboration with Gucci, A Vibe Called Tech calls upon four artists to celebrate the Black image*, in "It's Nice That", 18 January 2021; <https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/a-vibe-called-tech-pioneers-of-the-past-photography-180121> [last access 9 April 2022].

when established US artist Richard Prince posted some of their work on his account and then help them to launch exhibitions²⁰².

2.3.4.4 Conclusions

By presenting all the cases along this paragraph, the intention was to offer a partial overview of the situation of contemporary art in Italy for Afro-descendant artists. The examples reported prove that attention towards black Italian artists exists, but it is relegated to a few institutions or galleries that are specifically interested in them, or are initiatives created by people belonging to the black community who felt the need to create cultural spaces to compensate for the lack of visibility in the Italian cultural system.

During the online conference *Reimagining the Archives and Centering Black Histories*, part of the series *Virtual Salons: Discourses on Black Italia* promoted by Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò New York University and in collaboration with NYU Florence, curator Simone Frangi stated that the Italian art scene is predominantly white. However, some work has been done at the thematical level of colonialism, structural racism, or absence of black contribution in Italian collections²⁰³.

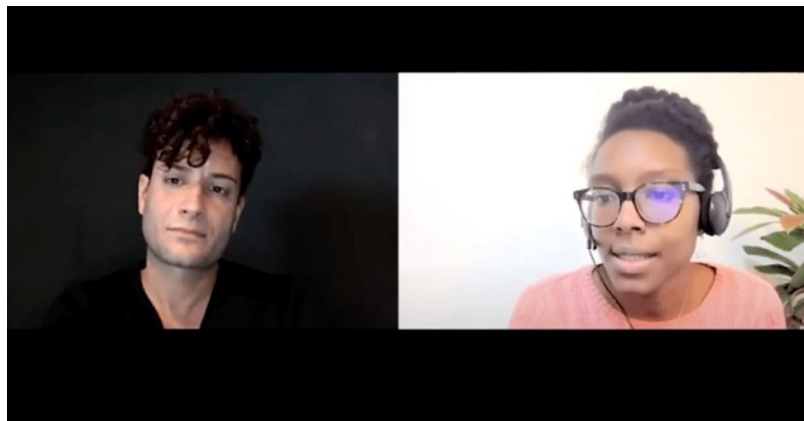


Figure 37, From the left: Simone Frangi, Candice Whitney, *Reimagining the Archives and Centering Black Histories* conference, 22 April 2021, still image

²⁰²B. Phillips, *How Instagram Is Changing the Art World*, in “Vice”, 18 May 2016; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/zn8ezy/how-instagram-is-changing-the-art-world> [last access 9 April 2022].

²⁰³ *Reimagining the archives and Centering Black Histories*, in CasaItalianaNYU Youtube channel, 21 April 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n51YVx97uKU&t=317s> [last access 13 April 2022].

This is a good starting point but there is still an inability in the institutional space to open up to all the experiences. According to Frangi, what is needed is an institutional reform that starts first from the self-education of white practitioners on these issues, which must be done in the perspective of a long-term commitment to overcome the common problem that afflicts many Italian institutions in often offering an ethnographic lecture of the black presence in art²⁰⁴.

This is a very dangerous perspective that have cut out many black artists from the art field and as Justin Randolph Thompson affirms, this is also the reason why many of them has search for representation abroad for example in France, UK or United States where there are more solid and inclusive artistic infrastructures and greater attention in representing Afro-descendent people. And this is true especially for many young Afro-Italians that have sought education and residence outside Italy to find more opportunities²⁰⁵.

Art often has the role of communicating the problems of society and consequently, the institutions that exhibit it, of being its mouthpiece. Cultural institutions such as museums indeed, should feel a responsibility to address and bring to the public certain social issues in order to raise awareness of them. One aspect that should be addressed for instance is that Italy is a multicultural country, an aspect that is not yet normalized. Cultural institutions have the great potential to educate people to understand the challenges of society and the world around us through art which could prove to be an excellent way of bringing the 'different' closer to those who fear or ignore it, in order to promote the overcoming of the dynamics of discrimination and exclusion that still characterize the country, in its society and consequently in its art system.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ S. Benaglia, *Intervista con Justin Randolph Thompson*, in "ATP DIARY", 5 December 2020; <http://atpdiary.com/interview-justin-randolph-thompson/> [last access 15 April 2022].

CHAPTER 3 - Case studies of Afro-Italian artists: Victor Fotso Nyie, Binta Diaw and Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti

3.1 Victor Fotso Nyie

Victor Fotso Nyie was born in Douala, Cameroon, in 1990. He started his artistic education in 2007 when he took the admission test for the painting course at the *Institut de Formation Artistique*, in Mbalmayo. However, the artist developed an interest in working with ceramics and therefore decided to continue his artistic education with the study of ceramics, abandoning the idea of painting. After graduating, he decided to continue his studies abroad, moving to Italy in 2012. In 2013, he enrolled at the ITS Institute in Faenza, obtaining a Higher Technical Diploma for the design and prototyping of ceramic products. Subsequently, he wanted to attend a fine arts academy, but the process was not easy. For bureaucratic reasons, no institute gave him the opportunity to attend a job interview because he would have had to have the pre-enrolment application sent to him by the Italian Embassy in Cameroon. He eventually managed to access the Academy of Fine Arts in Ravenna where in 2017 he obtained the diploma of three-year course of mosaic and then attended the biennial course in sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna. He currently lives and works in Faenza ²⁰⁶.

The choice of Faenza as the town in which to live and work is significant because it is internationally renowned for the production of artistic ceramic. This has allowed the artist over the years to refine his knowledge and technique in working the material enabling him to acquire great mastery in ceramic artistic working.

²⁰⁶ Victor Fotso Nyie interview, in Wellmade official website, 2021; <https://www.well-made.it/victor-fotso-nyie/> [last access 18 April 2022].



Figure 38, Victor Fotso Nyie, courtesy of the artist

Despite the artist's young age and his recent career, he has been involved in numerous projects and exhibitions and has received many recognitions for his work.

One of the first relevant exhibition in which the artist was featured is *Pedagogia dello sguardo*, which opened in September 2015 at the Museo d'Arte della città di Ravenna. The exhibition was the result of the selection of the winners of the RAM biennial of 2014/2015. RAM was inaugurated in 1999 by the Mirada cultural Association with the aim of being a springboard for young visual artists in the city of Ravenna and its province²⁰⁷.

Victor Fotso Nyie was one of the seven winners of the 2014/2015 edition who had the chance to exhibit his works at the exhibition *Pedagogia dello sguardo* where the artist showed the work *Il danzatore*.

²⁰⁷ R.A.M. *Pedagogia dello sguardo*, in Museo d'Arte della città di Ravenna official website; <http://www.mar.ra.it/ita/Mostra/R.A.M.-2015> [last access 18 April 2022].



Figure 39, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Il danzatore*, terracotta, 2015, 80 x 40 x 35, courtesy of the artist

The exhibition aimed to make artists reflect on pedagogy from their point of view in terms of private experience, relationships, dialogue and upbringing. Victor Fotso Nyie started from his autobiographical experience by recalling the rite of passage he also performed as a young man. The rite is practiced by young people in specific villages in Cameroon, which are considered cultural, sacred and cult places where ancestors rest. The initiation rite consists of gathering with other young people of the same age in these villages and, through meetings, dances and discussions with the local elders, they are introduced to the community and become part of it, as well as being allowed to access certain sacred places. The sculpture, *Il danzatore*, represents this moment of passage, but with this work the artist wanted to reflect on another significant ritual he performed, namely when he left Cameroon in 2012 to come to Italy. This reflection came to him after finding a photo of his entire family at the airport when he was about to leave them. For the artist, the airport represented a symbolic place where his initiation rite began, leading him to a country different from his own. Just like the young dancer in the sculpture who goes from a neutral, “foreign” state to a state of recognition by his community, the artist also went through this transition when he moved to Italy²⁰⁸. The appearance of the dancer is influenced by the canons of Western art; the dancer's movements are reminiscent particularly of the Dancing Maenad of

²⁰⁸ Source: E-mail communication with the artist Victor Fotso Nyie on 30 April 2022.

Skopas (330 BC.)²⁰⁹ and its twisting movement. At the same time, however, the dancer expresses the artist's personal stylistic code and contemporaneity²¹⁰.

In 2017, he took part in another project curated by Associazione Culturale Mirada, entitled *ArtSTORIA 5x5x5: 5 film, 5 artisti, 5 poetiche*, in collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts of Ravenna, Ravenna Municipality, and the Astoria Cinema in Ravenna. The project consisted in five film screenings combined with the artworks of some artists. Fotso Nyie inaugurated his exhibition at the Astoria Cinema for which he realized five sculptures which were inspired by the film *Francofonia* (2015) by Aleksander Sokurov, a movie selected by Leonardo Pivi, professor at the Ravenna Academy of Fine Arts²¹¹. The film narrates the attempt of the French official Jacques Audiard and the German Franz Wolff-Metternich to protect the treasures of the Louvre Museum during WWII. In one scene of the film, there is a storm that hits a ship carrying some artworks which are scattered at sea.

The artist presented his five sculptures through an unusual set-up: some works were presented inside overturned cardboard boxes, others were on the ground as if they had fallen from their pedestal. The set-up was meant to recall the same fate of the works in the film scene, struck by a storm and scattered at sea or as if they had been looted. The artist's intervention for this exhibition indeed reflected on the history of cultural heritage, which has been subjected to various forms of violence throughout history, creating a parallelism between the history of the Louvre's cultural heritage during the war years and the African heritage, which has been taken away from the African people over the centuries²¹².

²⁰⁹ The marble sculpture represents a follower of Bacchus worship in a moment of excitement and dance. The author is the Greek sculptor and architect Skopas. The sculpture is exhibited in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden.

²¹⁰ E. Stamboulis, *Estetica prammatica*, in *R.A.M Pedagogia dello Sguardo*, exhibition catalogue (Ravenna, Museo d'Arte della città di Ravenna, 12 September-27 September 2015), edited by M.R. Bentini et al., Ravenna: Giuda Edizioni, 2015, pp. 1-58, here pp. 28-29.

²¹¹ *ARTSTORIA 5X5X5*, in Mirada Associazione culturale official website; <https://www.mirada.it/arte-contemporanea-1/artstoria-5x5x5/> [last access 18 April 2022].

²¹² Source: E-mail communication with the artist Victor Fotso Nyie on 30 April 2022.



Figure 40, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Io*, 2017, copper glazed terracotta, 40 x 35 x 28 cm, installation view, courtesy of the artist



Figure 41, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Divina*, 2017, golden glazed terracotta, 35 x 22 x 40 cm, installation view, courtesy of the artist

However, according to Pivi, Fotso Nyie's works paradoxically make the visitor forget the barbarity of war and the violence that still characterises our present while the film tries to do the same by offering a reinterpretation of history through the eyes of art²¹³. Some relevant projects of 2019 are: *Made in train*, *To be going to* at the P420 gallery and the participation in the *III Biennale d'Arte don Franco Patrino*.

Made in train is a peculiar project that stems from the artist's participation in the *Roberto Daolio Plutôt la vie...Plutôt la ville* award, that the artist won in 2018. Roberto Daolio, an art critic and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna,

²¹³ *ARTSTORIA 5X5X5*, in Mirada Associazione culturale official website; <https://www.mirada.it/arte-contemporanea-1/artstoria-5x5x5/> [last access 18 April 2022].

during his career was committed to the promotion of Public Art and helped many artists to make them known in the art system. When he passed away in 2013, his family wanted to continue his mission by establishing a prize consisting of a grant offered by his family to a young artist from the Academy for the first prize winner, and an artistic residency in Iceland, for the second prize winner, offered by Little Constellation, an international network for contemporary art with which Daolio collaborated. Fotso Nyie won the first prize in the award with his project *Made in Train*. His work was appreciated for the originality of combining a personal moment such as making art during a train journey with something that could be integrated into the city's urban landscape²¹⁴.

Indeed, his project consisted in a series of small human heads made of pure clay which he made during his daily journeys from Ravenna to Bologna when he was a student. The small faces depicted people of different ages, sex and ethnicities and were characterized by disparate facial expressions. In 2019 he collocated them between the connections of the ancient terracotta bricks used to build Porta San Donato, a historic gateway to the city of Bologna and today a reference point for the area with its university buildings²¹⁵.



Figure 42, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Made in Train*, installation view, 2019, Porta San Donato, Bologna, courtesy of the artist

²¹⁴ Cuoredipietrapublicart, *Premio Roberto Daolio per l'arte pubblica Plutôt la vie...Plutôt la ville*, in "Cuore di pietra", 12 March 2018; <https://cuoredipietrapublicart.wordpress.com/2018/03/12/premio-roberto-daolio-per-larte-pubblica-plutot-la-vie-plutot-la-ville/> [last access 19 April 2022].

²¹⁵ Editorial staff, *Victor Fotso Nyie: Made in train*, in "Zero Bologna", 1st January 2019; <https://zero.eu/it/eventi/140594-victor-fotso-nyie-made-in-train,bologna/> [last access 19 April 2022].

The exhibition at the P420 gallery in Bologna was a collective show curated by Francesca Bertazzoni and Davide Ferri. The exhibition was the result of the fifth edition of *Opentour*, an initiative organised by the Academy of Fine Arts of Bologna in collaboration with Confcommercio Ascom, Fondazione Zucchelli (a promoter of art and music focused especially on talented students of the Academy of Fine Arts and Conservatory of Music Giovan Battista Martini, in Bologna) and several art galleries in the city. In addition to Nyie, the exhibition featured seven other artists:

Francesco Bendini, Zeno Bertozzi, Yingte Chen, Andrea Di Lorenzo, Riccardo Liberini, Maria Savoldi, Chen Xue. The theme of the exhibition was suggested by the linguistic construction “to be going to” which in the English language is a form to express a future action that can have two meanings: the intention to do something that has already been planned or the inevitability of something that is going to happen and that is not decided by the subject. Starting from this apparent contradiction of an action that oscillates between intention and submission and the idea of circular movement implied by the repetition of "to" at the beginning and end of the sentence, the exhibition reflects on the status of the selected participants who are all students involved in a process of formation/transformation that the artists aim for, and at the same time, they are dealing with an exhibition that might inevitably accelerate their progress without them having the awareness and intention of it²¹⁶.

The artist exhibited four sculptures for this exhibition, all of which are portraits of his family members who have remained in Cameroon. These artworks stem from a feeling of homesickness, however the portraits are not simply a mimesis of the subjects portrayed, but the desire to represent their psychological aspects too. Of particular interest is the sculpture entitled *Madre*, which represents in fact the artist’s mother. In this sculpture, which is very different from the other in his production, the artist uses cylindrical shapes to build the human figure. This method is typical of both traditional African and Western sculptors of the past, who used to start the sculpting process from a cylindrical wooden trunk²¹⁷.

²¹⁶ *To be going to*, Press release, gallery P420; <http://www.p420.it/en/mostre/to-be-going-to> [last access 18 April 2022].

²¹⁷ *Memoriae*, exhibition press release, 2022.

Madre also recalls Cézanne's pictorial practice of using three essential geometric forms. His famous saying, 'treating nature through the cylinder, the sphere and the cone', which sums up precisely this practice of painting reality using three geometric figures (cylinders, spheres and cones), was not meant to represent a radical way of reconstructing reality through geometric form but was rather intended as a practice of representing reality in the most easily legible and evident way. In fact, the tangible sphere can only be grasped through observation of the reality that surrounds us, consisting precisely of the three essential geometric forms that materialise the reality we perceive²¹⁸.



Figure 43, Victor Fotsó Nyie, *Madre*, 2015, terracotta, 40 x 33 x 40 cm, courtesy of the artist

The *Biennale d'Arte Don Franco Patrino*, in which the artist exhibited *Madre* in 2019, is a contest promoted by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cento in collaboration with the Cassa di Risparmio di Cento SpA and the municipality of Cento. The contest is addressed to all under thirty young artists of the national territory. The jury selects three winners who are awarded with a money prize and their artworks become part of the art collection of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cento. Moreover, the artist

²¹⁸ R. Barilli, *L'arte contemporanea da Cézanne alle ultime tendenze*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007, 4.th ed., here p. 30.

who wins the first prize has the chance to organise some solo exhibitions in the cities of Cento and Ferrara in the long term. Fotso Nyie, who participated in the third edition of the *Don Franco Patrino* Biennial in 2019, was selected from a jury composed of Gianni Cerioli and Marina Malagodi (representatives of the Fondazione), Ada Patrizia Fiorillo (art historian at the University of Ferrara), Fausto Gozzi, (director of the GAM gallery), Massimo Marchetti (art critic) and Valeria Tassinari (curator and art critic) who decided to award him the first prize for the originality and technical quality of his artistic research²¹⁹.

From this opportunity the artist was featured in a group exhibition at the Museo MAGI '900 in Cento in 2020, together with other seven artists who were selected for the third edition of the biennial. The theme assigned to that edition and then to the exhibition at the museum was “realisms”, a topic with different possibilities of reading and interpretation that the artists interpreted with their own personal point of view. Fotso Nyie presented some sculptures from the *Bios* series, which consist of several white, spherical maternal wombs.



Figure 44, Victor Fotso Nyie, glazed ceramic, 2019, 32 x 30 x 29 cm, courtesy of the artist

²¹⁹ *III Biennale d'Arte don Franco Patrino*, in Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cento official website; https://www.fondazionecento.it/borsa_studio_estero.htm?v_lingua=ITA&v_menu_lista=METOP-M0002-M0206 [last access 19 April 2022].

Inside these sculptures there is a life in metamorphosis, that is why the belly presents some traces of internal movements that shape the belly according to the necessity of the creature that is growing inside. These forms that the spheric belly assumes are the manifestation of the deep interaction that exists between the mother and the child. The sense of this series is thus the celebration of the power of life²²⁰.

With the artwork represented above, the artist also won in 2018 the *CeramicAppignano* international ceramic art award, a contest promoted by the municipality of Appignano (MC), the cultural association *AppCreativa* with the collaboration of Matteo Zauli, an expert in ceramic production and founder of the Carlo Zauli Museum. The competition is promoted every year with the aim of encouraging the research and the renewal in the production of artistic ceramic²²¹.

In 2021 Fotso Nyie also had a solo exhibition entitled *Résilience* at the MA*GA museum, in Gallarate, in collaboration with the Black History Month Florence. The exhibition was focused on the relation between Italy and Cameroon and their long story of cooperation agreement²²². In this occasion the artist worked on the transgenerational malaise and anger, due to the living conditions of African men both in the West and in Africa, where there are heads of state at the service of the imperial powers. The artist exhibited three generations that emotionally expressed social and political unease in different ways: *Eco*, *Il Ribelle* and *Autoritario*.

²²⁰ A. P. Fiorillo, *Victor Fotso Nyie. Bios, Biennale d'arte don Franco Patruno 2019*, exhibition catalogue (Pieve di Cento, MAGI '900, 14 December 2019-12 January 2020), curated by G. Cerioli, texts by G. Cerioli, A. P. Fiorillo, G. Perego, 2019, here p.26.

²²¹ Premio Internazionale d'Arte ceramica CeramicAppignano, in Appignano municipality official website, 2018; <https://www.comune.appignano.mc.it/eventi-cms/premio-internazionale-darte-ceramica-ceramicappignano/> [last access 19 April 2022].

²²² The Recovery Plan. Victor Fotso Nyie, Francis Offman exhibition; https://www.museomaga.it/en/mostre/169/THE_RECOVERY_PLAN [last access 19 April 2022].



Figure 45, Victor Fotso Nyie, Eco, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and gold, 35 × 38 × 32 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist



Figure 46, Victor Fotso Nyie, Il ribelle, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and platinum, 40 × 46 × 53 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist



Figure 47, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Autoritario*, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and platinum, 38 x 25 x 30 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

Also in 2021, the artist was featured in the *MCZ Territorio* project promoted by the Carlo Zauli Museum in Faenza, his hometown. The museum is named after Carlo Zauli, one of the most recognised ceramic sculptors of the 20th century. After his death in 2002, at the wish of his family, the sculptor's atelier was transformed into a museum with two permanent collections: one dedicated to Zauli to keep his memory alive and to make him known to younger artists who can draw inspiration from his artistic production, and one dedicated to the works of contemporary artists with particular attention to ceramics, a material of the local Faentine tradition. The museum is also a reference point for contemporary art thanks to its numerous activities in addition to exhibitions, such as artist residencies, conferences, educational projects, or contemporary music festivals²²³. *MCZ Territorio* is a project that every year is dedicated to a different artist from the territory and in 2021 it was the turn of Victor Fotso Nyie who for the occasion exhibited two recent works already mentioned above, namely: *Suivre ses rêves* (2021), the one representing his younger brothers in the

²²³ Il Museo ieri e oggi, in Museo Zauli official website; <http://www.museozauli.it/storia-museo/> [last access 20 April 2022].

action of reappropriating their cultural heritage and *Sous le Baobab* (2021), a portrait of a man's head from which thoughts or dreams materialise.

In the same year the artist was the winner of the *Artigiano del cuore* contest, a project by Wellmade, an Italian platform that allows people to discover the best artisans and their products with the aim of promoting handicrafts of excellence, and promoted by the Fondazione Cologni Mestieri D'Arte, a non-profit organisation founded in Milan in 1995 by Franco Cologni to safeguard the heritage of craftsmanship. The situation caused by the pandemic has heavily affected the category of artists and artisans. This is why the fourth edition of *Artigiano del cuore* wanted to support an artisan enterprise founded by a young entrepreneur who had open his or her own atelier in the previous three years. Like in the third edition in 2020, the contest included a special prize for the winner consisting of a donation collected through a fundraising campaign in order to support the winner's activities and artistic projects. Fotso Nyie was first selected as a finalist along with nine other candidates by the Fondazione Cologni and then, through an online vote made by the public, he was declared the winner²²⁴. For the artist it has been a very important help as he had just opened his laboratory and, as he affirmed in an interview for Wellmade, he experienced the period of the pandemic as a moment of great uncertainty and panic, characterised for him by the cancellation of many projects and the slowing down of all activities. However, it was also for him an intense moment of research, reflection, and meditation. Certainly, his participation in the project gave him a new stimulus to restart his artistic research with the help of the donations collected, which enabled him to buy the raw materials and a high-temperature oven to create his artworks²²⁵.

²²⁴ *Artigiano del cuore IV edizione 2021*, in *Artigiano del cuore official website*; <https://artigianodelcuore.it/iv-edizione-2021/> [last access 20 April 2022].

²²⁵ Interviste Victor Fotso Nyie, in Wellmade official website; <https://www.well-made.it/victor-fotso-nyie/> [last access 20 April 2022].

In 2021 the artist inaugurated an exhibition entitled *Rimembranza* at Palazzo Turchi di Bagno in Ferrara curated by Fiorillo, Marchetti and Tassinari, who were already familiar with Fotso Nyie's work, having been members of the jury of the 2019 *Don Franco Patruno Art Biennial* in which they had awarded the artist. *Rimembranza* was the other exhibition linked to the participation in the third edition of the *Biennale d'Arte Don Franco Patruno* in 2019.

About this exhibition and the series of works on display the artist said:

My theme is that of the 're-appropriation' of African cultural heritage by the nations of origin. My ancestors were deprived by western settlers of objects that were very important for their social, political, and religious functions because they were considered exotic 'souvenirs'. The big problem of the coercive exportation of these tools and their alienation to other countries is afflicting new generations more than ever. African youth is forced to come to Europe to learn about their own history, to see at first hand things they have only heard about or read about in books. [...] Consequently, they have a duty to preserve and expose them, regardless of the irreversible process of disidentification and devaluation that they have triggered. My work aims to give voice to this need for rediscovery of identity and moral redemption²²⁶.

The idea of despoliation that has characterised African cultural heritage for centuries and the desire to regain possession of it are well represented by the five artworks exhibited in the show. *Observer les Étoiles* is one of them, depicting a sleeping girl clutching to her chest a golden idol which represent a piece of her cultural heritage. However, the fact that the girl is asleep raises the question of whether the heritage she has regained is real or just a dreamlike possibility.

²²⁶“Il mio tema è quello della “riappropriazione” del patrimonio culturale africano da parte delle nazioni d’origine. I miei antenati sono stati privati dai coloni occidentali di oggetti molto importanti per le loro funzioni sociali, politiche e religiose perché considerati “souvenir” esotici. Il grande problema dell’esportazione coattiva di questi strumenti e della loro alienazione in altri Paesi sta affliggendo più che mai le nuove generazioni. La gioventù africana è costretta a venire in Europa per conoscere la propria storia, per vedere da vicino cose di cui ha solo sentito parlare o di cui ha letto nei libri. [...] Di conseguenza essi hanno il dovere di custodirli ed esporli, incuranti dell’irreversibile processo di disidentificazione e devalorizzazione che hanno innescato. Il mio lavoro intende dar voce a questa necessità di riscoperta identitaria e di riscatto morale.”; *L’arte di Nyie per riscattare l’Africa «Cerco l’identità rubata dai coloni»*, in “La Nuova Ferrara”, 27 October 2021; <https://lanuovaferrara.gelocal.it/tempo-libero/2021/10/27/news/l-arte-di-nyie-per-riscattare-l-africa-cerco-l-identita-rubata-dai-coloni-1.40858743> [last access 19 April 2022].



Figure 48, Victor Fotsi Nyie, *Observer les Étoiles*, 2021, terracotta and gold, 100 x 35 x 35 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

Then there is *Voyager ensemble* and *Sous le Baobab*, both representing the heads of two young men in whose minds ancestral memories seem to be awakening.

What their minds seem to recall is something that despite having been uprooted from them, they always carry and retain in their minds as part of their being, almost as if it were an extension of themselves. These memories are indeed represented in the sculptures as a kind of extension of their physical body.

An interesting aspect to note in the artist's works is the language of the titles. Sometimes he uses Italian, but very often also French. This is significant because it once again brings us back to the link with the colonial legacy. French, together with English, is one of the official languages of Cameroon. The country became a German colony in 1884, but after the First World War the territory was divided between France and England so French and English became the official languages. Moreover, the fact that he decides to use both French and Italian for the titles of his works perfectly reflects the duality of the artist who belongs to both African and Italian cultures. The

use of both languages also suggests his desire to express himself and identify with both cultures.



Figure 49, Victor Fotso Nyie, Voyager ensemble, 2021, terracotta and gold, 54 × 35 × 40 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist



Figure 50, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Sous le Baobab*, 2021, terracotta and gold, 55 × 30 × 35 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

What is stated by the artist regarding the reappropriation of the African cultural heritage was also stressed by Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor when he affirmed that: “Generations of Africans have already lost incalculable history and cultural reference points because of the absence of some of the best artworks created on the continent. We shouldn’t have to ask, over and over, to get back what is ours”²²⁷.

Reappropriation is clearly an issue that can no longer be postponed or ignored as it is about giving back to the rightful owners what should be theirs by right. African people have the right to recover their historical and cultural heritage in order to reconstruct their past and present identity. Indeed, Fotso Nyie’s artworks do not aim at the mere contemplation of this stolen past but are an action of reconstruction of scattered roots that become the basis on which to build a new future. In this series of works, the roots are transformed into golden African idol and sculptures that are preserved in a protective hug like in the case of *Observer les Étoiles*, or into thoughts or perhaps dreams that emerge from the heads of men in *Voyager ensemble* and *Sous le Baobab*.

²²⁷V. Ehikhamenor, *Give Us Back What Our Ancestors Made*, in “The New York Times”, 28 January 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/looted-benin-bronzes.html> [last access 19 April 2022].

In his artworks the artist also reveals a contrast of artistic languages: the hyperrealism of the portraits which derive from the Western figurative culture and the stylization, typical of the African tradition, represented by the little idols. However, these very idols are often represented as amputated, with some parts missing like scars, signs of a violence that cannot be erased²²⁸.

Besides these three sculptures there were other two more which were featured also in the solo exhibition *Quella terra tra le mani* curated by Elettra Stamboulis and held in 2022 at the Galleria comunale la Molinella in Faenza. The two shared artworks are *Suivre ses rêves* and *Rève lucide*.



Figure 51, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Suivre ses rêves*, polychrome ceramic, 2021, 100 x 45 x 90 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

²²⁸ M. Marchetti, *Identificazione*, in *Rimembranze*, exhibition catalogue (Ferrara, Palazzo Turchi di Bagno, 27 October-18 November 2021), edited by A. P. Fiorillo, M. Marchetti, V. Tassinari, 2021.



Figure 52, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Rêve lucide*, 2021, terracotta and gold, 32 × 42 × 35 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

In the first sculpture *Suivre ses rêves*, it is possible to see two twins (who represent Fotso Nyie's younger siblings) carrying a sort of tray full of gold objects. These objects are once again the representation of the looted African heritage that the twins want to know about since they have been denied the opportunity to do so. However, the artist poses an open question with this work: what could my brothers do with the restitution of a de-identified heritage taken away from their time?²²⁹. Of course, this doubt does not detract from the fact that reappropriation is necessary, but it does make us reflect on the consequences that past events have on the present. This artwork, unlike the others, also includes the use of polychrome ceramic used to make the children's clothes. This use of ceramics is very interesting considering that Faenza, the city where he works and lives, is internationally renowned for the production of artistic ceramic. The artwork therefore demonstrate the knowledge and mastery that the artist has acquired in working with it.

Through *Rêve lucide* the artist wants to give a sense of hope. The damage of expropriating the cultural heritage to people from the African continent is already done but the figure of this sculpture dreams of the possibility of a golden breastfeeding,

²²⁹ E. Stamboulis, *Uno sguardo afrofuturista*, in *Quella terra tra le mani. Victor Fotso Nyie*, (Faenza, Galleria comunale la Molinella, 15-31 January 2022, unpublished text; <https://www.stamboulis.org/2022/01/15/uno-sguardo-afrofuturista/> [last access 19 April 2022].

symbol that the African people can still reappropriate and feed their origins and culture. The topic of the dream and hope is recurrent in this series and indeed in the artwork *Ange Gardien*, the young boy holds in his hands a copy of a traditional original work, dreaming of a possible future where this can happen for real. With *Regard passioné* and *La graine qui germe* the artist gives us the idea that the possibility of reconnecting with own's cultural history is still possible²³⁰.



Figure 53, Victor Fotso Nyie, Ange Gardien, 2022, terracotta and gold, 57 × 30 × 40 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

²³⁰ Ibid.



Figure 54, Victor Fotso Nyie, La graine qui germe, 2022, terracotta and gold, 55 × 30 × 40 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist



Figure 55, Victor Fotso Nyie, Regard passionné, 2022, terracotta and gold, 57 × 30 × 40 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

Finally, the sculpture *Vue céleste* is a reflection on the responsibilities of the Western powers in confiscating the African continent of its heritage. The man of this sculpture observes the audience through his “golden eyes” which reflect the spectator who is obliged to question himself and his own outlook, which often has passively post-colonial horizons²³¹.



Figure 56, Victor Fotso Nyie, Vue céleste, 2022, terracotta and gold, 35 × 30 × 32 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

In this series of artworks, his characters represent an awakening of conscience, an appeal that comes from deep within to reclaim the rights of an entire continent. His art thus expresses a desire for truth and is a means of giving voice to a collective and identity-based demand for justice. The theme of the series is undoubtedly loss, but there is also redemption because the desire to rediscover the lost cultural heritage fills the void with a generative power which, as we have seen from the various works presented above, revives idols from the head. These dark bodies are intended to represent a commitment to keep attention focused on the urgent need to open a bilateral dialogue on the issue of the restitution of the immense artistic heritage, stolen by colonial powers throughout Africa in past centuries. These are works of art with a sacred and ritual function, which have been forcibly taken to end up in the collections of Western museums for study and preservation, but also for private collecting, often unaware of the sacred value and significance of the works, with the devastating

²³¹ Ibid.

consequences of a very serious cultural deprivation of peoples. These objects today, in addition to their material value, have an increasingly strong symbolic value, as they represent an idea of radical injustice, in the face of which we are all called upon to demand forms of compensation²³².

In both exhibitions, *Rimembranza* and *Quella terra tra le mani* there was a specific display of the works. All the sculptures were placed within a rectangular perimeter covered with clayey soil of a particular warm color. During the vernissage of *Quella terra tra le mani* the artist explains that the soil comes from Faenza, the city of the exhibition and the place where he lives and works. The soil recalls the idea of home, of roots, and is linked to the desire to regain possession of those roots, as communicated by the sculptures. The fact of using an Italian soil to speak about the topic of the expropriation of the African continent cultural heritage, suggests a reflection on the fact that we live in a globalized world where, however, contemporary African man is still subjected to a condition of suffering and discrimination. In this sense, the artist's use of an Italian soil is a sort of symbol of living freely as a black body in a country different from that of origin and of erasing social and cultural barriers.

Les Filons Géologiques is another significant group exhibition in which the artist participated. The show was held at Palazzo D'Accursio in Bologna from 3 December 2021 to 20 February 2022 and was curated by Black History Month Florence, Black History Month Bologna (promoted by Justin Randolph Thompson in 2020 with the aim of expanding a network to promote Afro-descendant cultural production in the context of the city of Bologna) and the contribution of Bologna municipality.

The title of the exhibition, *Les Filons Géologiques*, comes from a verse in the poem *Allure* by the Martinique author Aimé Césaire in which he refers to the geological process of the formation within rocks of veins of minerals of different composition, deposited by precipitation due to groundwater flowing through fracture lines in rock masses. Black History Month Bologna was inspired by this concept which they linked to the one of the geopolitics of bodies, discussed during the second edition of the Black History Month Bologna. According to postcolonial studies, the practices of

²³² V. Tassinari, *Doppio Sogno e Ritorno*, in *Rimembranze*, exhibition catalogue (Ferrara, Palazzo Turchi di Bagno, 27 October-18 November 2021), edited by A. P. Fiorillo, M. Marchetti, V. Tassinari, 2021.

administrative and political control exercised in the past by colonial powers over subjugated territories have now been transferred to the bodies of individuals migrating to those countries, giving rise to new and more insidious forms of discrimination. The image of a slow and subterranean process such as the one described in Césaire's poem precisely reflects the affirmation of the Afro-descendant identity in the world, which despite the dynamics of discrimination, a legacy of colonialism, has managed to assert itself over time in the social fabric, carving out with difficulty a necessary space to live, a *filon* (a strand), just like the mineral formations that fit between fracture lines in rock masses. Bringing to light these insertions, these strands, in the global social fabric of Afro-descendants helps to question the Eurocentric view of the history of the African continent, wrongly perceived as passive and linear²³³.

The exhibition featured thirteen artists of African origin who presented their artworks in order to reflect on the theme of identity and the difficult dialogue with the colonial past and diaspora. Fotso Nyie exhibited two sculptures: *Observer les Étoiles* which had already been discussed for the exhibition *Rimembranza* and the other one was *Il Ribelle*, exhibited also in the occasion of the exhibition *Résilience* at MA*GA museum. This sculpture in specific, with a platinum glazed surface, reflects the viewer and at the same time covers a scream of intergenerational anger that persists and precisely meditate on this condition of the Afro-descendant individual and their difficulty to be accepted in the western society.

The artist's latest projects presented in this dissertation concern three recent exhibitions: *Radici aeree*, *12 Artists of Tomorrow* and *Memoriae*.

Radici aeree is another of the exhibition that the artist was able to organise because he won the third edition of Don Franco Patrino Art Biennial. The exhibition, curated by Patrizia Marchetti and Tassinari, was held in two locations: the Biblioteca Pinacoteca 'Le Scuole' in Pieve di Cento and the Vetrina del Palazzo del Governatore in Cento. It was inaugurated on 26 March and closed on 5 June 2022.

Most of the artworks featured in this event are the same as those previously presented for the exhibitions *Quella terra tra le mani* and *Rimembranza* as the artist's research

²³³ *Les Filons Géologiques. Palazzo d'Accursio Bologna*, in "ATP Diary", 24 January 2022; <http://atpdiary.com/les-filons-geologiques-palazzo-daccursio-bo/> [last access 23 April 2022].

still focuses on the theme of reappropriation. However, one artwork is particularly interesting: *Reine mère*.

The sculpture depicts a mother holding her baby wrapped in a colourful dress which ties the child to her body to carry him. This is the representation of the artist in his mother's arms. Behind her shoulder, the mother holds a golden African statuette representing an elderly man touching his beard, which is the typical figuration of the ancestor and of the wiseman. With this work, the artist wanted to pay tribute to his mother who is the one who taught the artist the value of tradition and his culture since he was a child. In the horizontal reading of the work, she acts as an intermediary between the baby and the statuette, bringing the past and the future into dialogue on the same level. Moreover, in this work the artist has placed a broken golden brick in the corner of the work, which represents an open wound to live with as the artist's mother passed away in a car accident in 2005²³⁴.



Figure 57, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Reine mère*, 2021, terracotta and gold, 80 x 65 x 47, courtesy of the artist

²³⁴ Source: E-mail communication with the artist Victor Fotso Nyie, 29 April 2022.

The other current exhibition *12 Artists of Tomorrow*, curated by Giulia Abate, was inaugurated at the Mucciaccia Contemporary gallery in Rome on 8 April and closed on 20 May 2022.

The twelve international artists exhibiting were selected from the second edition of the editorial project *222 artisti emergenti su cui investire | 2021* by Exibart²³⁵.

This editorial project started in 2019 consists of a publication that aims to offer an overview of young artists working in Italy with different artistic languages. The selection of all the artists for each edition of the project is made by involving numerous professionals in the field such as curators, critics, specialised journalists, foundations, and contemporary galleries in order to map emerging talents. In this sense, the editorial project proves to be a very useful tool for the evaluation of cultural investments in the emerging segment of contemporary art. The publications are structured in such a way that each artist has a page dedicated to his or her profile, one or two photos of the most representative works, a bilingual statement, contacts, and a range of current quotations²³⁶.

As Exibart's editorial director Cesare Biasini Selvaggi explained, regarding *12 Artists of Tomorrow* exhibition:

This exhibition project does not have a theme per se, but brings together twelve emerging Italian artists or, at any rate, artists active in Italy who share the same ability to question existing categories of thought, to question themselves incessantly in and about today, opening their perceptive and critical vision to a new reading of situations, images, objects, categories, concepts, and subjectivity. In a slalom between seemingly contradictory, incompatible notions, faded by disinformation, all 12 artists invited here reveal a search for realities that are or could be off-limits, proposing alternative meanings to what we take every day as facts, different ways of relating them to each other and of contextualising them²³⁷.

With the works *Maliconia* and *Vanità* on display in the exhibition, the artist explores the delicate theme of diaspora or the reappropriation of a cultural heritage of origin,

²³⁵ *12 Artists of Tomorrow*, in Mucciaccia Contemporary official website, Press release, 2022; <https://mucciacciacontemporary.com/it/mostre/12-artists-of-tomorrow-2022/> [last access 22 April].

²³⁶ *222 artisti emergenti su cui investire*, in exhibart. service official website; <https://service.exibart.com/prodotto/222-artisti-emergenti-cui-investire-2021/> [last access 22 April 2022].

²³⁷ “Il presente progetto espositivo non ha un tema di per sé, ma riunisce dodici artisti emergenti italiani o, comunque, attivi in Italia accomunati dalla loro capacità di mettere in discussione le categorie di pensiero esistenti, di interrogarsi incessantemente nell’oggi e di oggi, aprendo la visione percettiva e critica a una nuova lettura di situazioni, immagini, oggetti, categorie, concetti e soggettività. In uno

inviting the viewer to take a different, non-Western point of view. Fotso Nyie's two sculptures from the series of gold and silver portraits approach a realistic representation made eccentric by the use of precious gold patinas that make the challenging subject matter more seductive and lighter²³⁸.



Figure 58, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Vanità*, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and gold, 40 × 30 × 40 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

slalom tra nozioni apparentemente contraddittorie, incompatibili, sbiadite dalla disinformazione, tutti i 12 artisti qui convocati rivelano una ricerca di realtà che sono o potrebbero essere off-limits, proponendoci significati alternativi a ciò che prendiamo tutti i giorni come dati di fatto, modi diversi di metterli in relazione tra loro e di contestualizzarli”; *12 Artists of Tomorrow*, in Mucciaccia Contemporary official website, Press release, 2022; <https://mucciacciacontemporary.com/it/mostre/12-artists-of-tomorrow-2022/> [last access 22 April].

²³⁸ A. P. Fiorillo, *La necessità della memoria*, in *Rimembranze*, exhibition catalogue (Ferrara, Palazzo Turchi di Bagno, 27 October-18 November 2021), edited by A. P. Fiorillo, M. Marchetti, V. Tassinari, 2021.



Figure 59, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Malinconia*, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and gold, 37 × 25 × 30 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

The last exhibition is *Memoriae*, a solo exhibition held from 13 May to 10 June 2022, promoted by architect Giovanni Cattani who has decided to open the doors of his design gallery, Off Gallery, to sculpture by presenting Victor Fotso Nyie for the occasion. The exhibition is in collaboration with P420 gallery in Bologna and curated by Manuela Valentini. The project is part of Art City Bologna 2022, an event held this year from 7 May to 15 May 2022, which animates the city of Bologna with cultural events, inaugurations, and extraordinary openings even in places often not designated for art to rediscover the city. The exhibition was also concomitant with Arte Fiera, a fair dedicated to art galleries of the city held from 13 to 15 May. The show presented at the Off Gallery featured seven sculptures made in 2020 which are in dialogue with the furnishing objects designed by Cattani and other designers. The artworks were all part of his series of platinum or golden heads inspired mainly by the faces of his relatives. As was the case with the aforementioned artwork *Madre*, the artist shapes his sculptures to create these pronounced facial expressions that testify to the artist's great skill. However, the works are not merely an exercise in style and imitation of the subjects, but the artist's attempt to convey the personality of these subjects through

sculpture. The production of these sculptures can therefore be seen as the artist's desire to keep alive the memory of those people he has not seen for a long time because they live in Cameroon (and because of the pandemic too) but who remain strong presences in his mind. His artistic research thus reveals his condition of duality between the identity as an African man and his identity as a Western man. In this duality, the viewer can also mirror himself/herself, as he/she can also find his/her own family in the artist's portraits. Some of the family members that Fotso Nyie introduces us to during this exhibition are: *Autoritario* (which was already exhibited for the *Résilience* exhibition), *Il Patriarca* and *Furbizia*, who are respectively his maternal grandfather, the paternal grandfather, and his sister²³⁹.



Figure 60, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Il Patriarca*, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and platinum, 25 x 40 x 35 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

²³⁹ Victor Fotso Nyie, *Memoriae* solo exhibition, Press release, unpublished text, 2022.



Figure 61, Victor Fotso Nyie, *Furbizia*, 2020, glazed Faenza ceramic and platinum, 33 x 28 x 42 cm, photo credits: Carlo Favero, courtesy of the artist

The link of this exhibition, *Memoriae*, with Giovanni Cattani's design gallery lies in the fact that just as the architect designs houses and the objects that populate them, thus creating private spaces with memories and fragments of life, in the same way Fotso Nyie, through the representation of his family and therefore of his land, creates a treasure chest of memories that reconnects him to his roots²⁴⁰.

After the presentation of all the works in the course of this paragraph, it becomes clear that the young artist is following an artistic quest directed towards specific themes that are extremely close to him. His persistence in presenting these themes makes him an artist who, through his sculptures, contributes to an urgent debate on the broader condition of being black in a Western society, which involves a number of difficulties from various points of view. Victor Fotso Nyie, as an artist, focuses on the theme of the reappropriation of African cultural heritage scattered in Western museums, decontextualized but above all stolen from its legitimate owners, underlining how this has consequences in the identity definition of Afro-descendants. However, Fotso Nyie's works are also often a celebration of life, as in the case of works such as *Bios*, and a celebration of relationships, as can be seen in the numerous sculptures

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

representing members of his family. Indeed, human relationships are what keeps us anchored to our origins, what allows us to remember who we are at all times and tell the story of our lives. In fact, thanks to the artist's works, which are very autobiographical, we get to know the artist even in the most private and delicate aspects of his life, as in the case of the work *Reine mère*. This open narrative towards the viewer allow to create a strong empathy with the artist and his works.

The themes addressed are also always conveyed through the beauty and elegance of the works themselves, but also through great sensitivity, and impressive expressive power. This is possible thanks to his craftsmanship in working with ceramics. He can render the emotions of the protagonists of his sculptures with great naturalness and emotional intensity. He moulds their faces with such mastery that they almost come alive, giving the viewer the feeling of being in front of a real person. Fotso Nyie also experiments with the use of different materials combined with ceramics, such as gold, platinum, copper or polychrome ceramics. This experimentation suggests the constant research and evolution of Fotso Nyie's artistic poetics, which offers the viewer an extremely seductive aesthetic experience that is at the same time able to deal with delicate issues of great social and cultural importance.

3.2 Binta Diaw

The artist who will be presented in this section, Binta Diaw, is the youngest of the three, but this does not make her artistic production any less rich or interesting. Binta Diaw is a Senegalese-Italian visual artist who was born in 1995 in Milan, where she currently lives and works. She manifested her interest in art from an early age, attending art high school in Milan. She later decided to continue the path in the artistic field obtaining the bachelor in Sculpture at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts of Milan in 2017. She then finished her art studies in 2019 with an MA at the Grenoble-Valence School of art and design in Grenoble, France.

Her artistic research is focused on the creation of works and installations which reflects on social phenomena like migration and immigration, female body as well as notions of identity. As a second-generation Senegalese-Italian artist indeed, she questions perceptions of Italianness and Africanness, exploring in first person the multiple

aspects of her blackness, her presence and position as a black woman in a Western context²⁴¹.



Figure 62, Binta Diaw, photo credits: Olga Michahelles, courtesy of the artist

During the years of her artistic formation, she was able to participate in numerous initiatives. In 2017 for example, she participated in the collective exhibition *Farfalle*, a project part of *La bellezza resta* promoted by Heart. Pulsazioni Culturali association based in Vimercate.

Heart is a non-profit association that operates at various level in the cultural field such as in the organisation of art exhibitions, concerts, plays, and film screenings, but also organizes meetings, debates or educational courses for adults and children²⁴². *La bellezza resta* is one of their projects born in 2015, curated by Bartolena (art historian and critic), Fettelini (painter) and Accordino (art curator), which aims to reflect on the beauty of life to be interpreted through culture, underlining the importance of the

²⁴¹ About Binta Diaw; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/about/> [last access 26 April 2022].

²⁴² Chi Siamo, in Associazione Heart Pulsazioni culturali official website; http://www.associazioneheart.it/chi_siamo.php [last access 4 May 2022].

ability to rejoice, each in his or her own personal way²⁴³. The 2017 edition, entitled *Farfalle* (Butterflies) and curated by Gianfreda (sculptor), involved twelve students from the Brera Academy of Fine Arts who were asked to reflect on the theme of beauty and try to interpret it through personal experiences. Each artist exhibited two correlated works displayed in different locations: one work in the association's exhibition space and the other in an external location such as public or private spaces in the town of Vimercate²⁴⁴.

Binta Diaw presented inside the space of the association a video projection *Doundou*, a work that reflects on migration, on the need to leave one's homeland to find freedom elsewhere while the work outside the association was exhibited at the city library and it was *Teranga*. It is an installation composed of a carpet, some pillows and a tray with a teapot and some glasses for tea. *Teranga* is an installation about hospitality, in fact the title itself means hospitality in *Wolof*, a Senegalese language. The action of the artist consisted in moving the carpet and personal objects from her living room into an exhibition context. This intervention underlined Italy's difficulty in accepting the real and physical presence of different communities in the country, therefore the

²⁴³ *La bellezza resta*, in Associazione Heart Pulsazioni culturali official website; <http://www.associazioneheart.it/bellezza.php> [last access 4 May 2022].

²⁴⁴ *Farfalle*, in Associazione Heart Pulsazioni culturali official website; <http://www.associazioneheart.it/eventiarticolo.php?idp=896> [last access 4 May 2022].

installation was intended to be a symbol of the breaking down political and social barriers between diasporic communities and Italians²⁴⁵.



Figure 63, Binta Diaw, *Teranga*, 2017, carpet, pillows, teapot, glasses and tea, courtesy of the artist

In 2020, she made her debut with her first solo show at Giampaolo Abbondio gallery in Milan with the exhibition *In search of Our Ancestors's Gardens*. The title of the exhibition was inspired by the African American writer, poetess and activist Alice Walker, author of the book *In search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), which represents a point of reference for Black Feminism as she gave voice to the suffering, injustices and oppression that black women have experienced in the past and still continue to go all through this. Indeed, Alice Walker's words are so topical that Diaw identifies perfectly with the words of the book and makes her reflect on what it means to be an artist and a black woman in the Italian political and cultural context. *In search of Our Ancestors's Gardens* exhibition focuses on the importance of ancestors as symbols of traditions, stories, rituals that have been misinterpreted, in the case of Afro-descendant people, by the history that has been written from the Western perspective. In this sense, the exhibition transformed the gallery with an anti-colonial logic into a memorial space which gives back visibility and life to those forgotten people through the symbology of the soil. This aspect particularly emerges in the artwork *Chorus of Soil*. The installation is a large-scale reproduction of a slave ship of an 18th-century plan made of soil and seeds. The seeds placed in the topsoil are melon seeds and the

²⁴⁵ *Teranga*, in Binta Diaw official website; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/teranga/> [last access 4 May 2022].

choice of this is not random. This product is a species that originally grows in Africa, but it is also cultivated in southern Italy. The artist wanted to make a comparison with slavery in cotton fields and mafia plantations in southern Italy, where the same dynamics of American slavery in cotton fields are present in the current system of the *caporalato* (illegal recruitment of agricultural laborers) which systematically exploits thousands of migrants in these plantations²⁴⁶.



Figure 64, Binta Diaw, *Chorus of Soil*, 2019, soil and melon seeds, installation view, photo credits: Antonio Maniscalco, courtesy of the artist

The natural element also returns in a photographic series exhibited on this occasion namely *Paysages Corporels*. In particular the artist exhibited *Paysage Corporel I, II* and *III*. The artworks are the photographs of different parts of the artist's body which have been then reworked with the use of chalk, tracing on the photographic surface lines of colours that transform the lines and shape of the body into harmonious and ideally infinite journeys, paths, and landscapes. The artist affirms that the series was

²⁴⁶ Binta Diaw. *In Search of Our Ancestors' Gardens*, exhibition press release (Milan, Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, 23 January-31 March 2020; <https://www.giampaoloabbondio.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PR-In-Search-of-Our-Ancestors-Garden-Binta-Diaw-1.pdf> [last access 26 April 2022]).

born at a time in her life when she questioned herself as a woman and as a body. Indeed, the traces made with chalk on the surface are the result of a process of questioning identity and the body, and of a questioning linked to the cyclical movement of women, nature, and its complexities. Binta Diaw also talks about these works in relation to the pandemic. She affirmed that she suffered from the idea of being forced to stay away from nature, but it was exactly this distance that allowed her to discover and understand the nature inscribed in her body and the multiple relationships between them, a process that succeeded in getting the artist through the difficult time of the pandemic. She also had time to do research by reading many books through which she realised the importance of the notion of agriculture in ecofeminist thinking, which is meant as the culture of care and love. The 'culture of the body' can be seen as a new word to express how the body can educate us to take care of ourselves and to love by accepting all existing forms of life. These series of works are thus the result of questioning herself in an era where bodies are systematically linked to narratives conveyed by the image that new technologies give to them²⁴⁷.

The artist's body thus becomes the canvas from which the natural element emerges, represented by the blue of a great river, the yellow and red orography of rocks or roots as red as blood²⁴⁸.

²⁴⁷ S. Benaglia, *Intervista con Binta Diaw*, in "ATP Diary", 18 March 2021; <http://atpdiary.com/intervista-con-binta-diaw/> [last access 29 April 2022].

²⁴⁸ M. Ongaretti, *Binta Diaw coltiva un giardino degli antenati nella galleria di Giampaolo Abbondio*, in "Art Core", 28 January 2020; <http://artscore.it/binta-diaw-giardino-galleria-abbondio/> [last access 29 April 2022].



Figure 65, Binta Diaw, Paysage Corporel II, 2018, chalk on giclée print on 100% cotton paper mounted on dibond, 150 x 150 cm, photo credits: Antonio Maniscalco, courtesy of the artist



Figure 66, Binta Diaw, Paysage Corporel III, 2018, chalks on giclée print on 100% cotton paper mounted on dibond, 60 x 90 cm, photo credits: Antonio Maniscalco, courtesy of the artist



Figure 67, Binta Diaw, *Paysage Corporel I*, 2018, chalks on giclée print on 100% cotton paper mounted on dibond, 225 x 80 cm, photo credits: Antonio Maniscalco, courtesy of the artist

In 2020, the artist participated in other two significant exhibitions: *Nero Sangue* at the MA*GA museum in Gallarate and *Waves Between Us* held at Palazzo Re Rebaudengo in Turin.

The first exhibition *Nero Sangue* was promoted by Black History Month Florence and developed in collaboration with Angelica Pesarini, professor of sociology at the New York University in Florence. The focus of the project was the black body and the denunciation of systemic violence perpetrated on black people in the Italian farmlands, which they often represent for these workers a dangerous place where their lives are at risk for example due to lack of drinking water, health care or safety and rights.

The exhibition featured an installation composed of three elements: the sculpture *Nero Sangue*, which gives the exhibition its title, the series *Transfer* and the audio piece *Chorus of Zong* conceived already for the installation *Chorus of Soil*.

The sculpture *Nero Sangue* consists of two black tomatoes grown and harvested by migrant labourers, while *Transfer* is a series of portraits, made on cotton fabrics, taken from the *Difesa della Razza*, a newspaper founded by Mussolini in 1938 that promoted racial laws in Italy during the regime²⁴⁹. *Chorus of Zong* is an audio work which sounds as a polyphonic choir of voices of young Afro-Italians conversing with the echoing voices of their ancestors, all accompanied by water noises. The choir recites verses by the poet M. NourbeSe Philip, published in 2008 in her poetry collection *Zong!* and with which she gives voice to the 150 slaves of the Dutch ship *Zong*, sailed in 1781

²⁴⁹ S. Benaglia, *Intervista con Binta Diaw*, in “ATP Diary”, 18 March 2021; <http://atpdiary.com/intervista-con-binta-diaw/> [last access 29 April 2022].

from North Africa, who were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean by the ship's crew. The audio work is therefore a reminder that the voices of the African diaspora have faded away and unheard for centuries, in Italy and elsewhere, but it also reflects on questions of identity, origin, and belonging that the young Italian Afro-descendant community is currently dealing with²⁵⁰.



Figure 68, Binta Diaw, *Nero Sangue*, 2020, black tomatoes, photo credits: Jemma Robin Thompson, courtesy of the artist



Figure 69, Binta Diaw, *Transfer*, 2020, ink on cotton, courtesy of the artist

The investigation of Binta Diaw and Angelica Pesarini started from the labour in the tomato fields of southern Italy, where black migrants represent the majority of the

²⁵⁰ *Chorus of Zong*, in Binta Diaw official website; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/chorusofzong/> [last access 29 April 2022].

labour force, reflecting a practice of modern slavery²⁵¹. This starting point offers a more general reflection on what it means to inhabit a black body and according to Pesarini:

As James Baldwin states, the historical production of the Black Body is imbued with pain and terror. This is reiterated also by Martinican author Frantz Fanon, who wrote about the “*expérience vécue du Noir*” in his topical volume *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to Fanon, the lived experience of Blackness is characterised by a state of chronic uncertainty in which one may see the image of one’s own body denied and crystallized by the white gaze. “The white look, the only true look” would write Fanon, highlighting the power of the white gaze as a tool able to define, imprison and kill the racialised “Other”²⁵².

What concerns the production of the black body in the current Italian context, Angelica Pesarini referred to the role played by the colonial and fascist experience. The combination of elements such as colonialism, fascism and conceptualisations of race and identity, has produced forms of exploitation and negative representation of the black individual. During her research, Pesarini had the opportunity to analyse numerous images depicting the flora and fauna of the former colonies. Along with these images, there were also others of African people portrayed and classified as the different kinds of plants and animals. Africans were often depicted immersed in vegetation and surrounded by cattle; this was of course a method to emphasise the supposed physical and mental inferiority of African people and therefore demonstrate the superiority of the Italian race at the same time ²⁵³.

Also on the subject of the body was the group exhibition *Waves Between Us* promoted by Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation, which has been supporting young Italian and foreign artists since 1995 to promote contemporary art and bring it closer to a wider public.

The idea for the exhibition was linked to the double interpretation of the Italian term *sirena*, which can refer to the female mythological figure of the sea (mermaid) or to the sound that recalls the emergency (siren), which in 2020 was unfortunately a very common sound in Italy due to the devastating wave of the pandemic. In Homer’s

²⁵¹ A. Pesarini, *The Black Body*, in “The Florentine”, 17 February 2021; <https://www.theflorentine.net/2021/02/17/the-black-body/> [last access 29 April 2022].

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

Odyssey, the mermaid is depicted as a dangerous and powerful creature of the air and sea whose voice seduces men. In her seminal book *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (2003), Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes how the pathos of narration focuses on the deadly seductive circuit between voice and listening, sound and ear. Moreover, the fact that these creatures lives between the depths of the sea and on land, make them the symbol of both the proximity and distance experienced in our world during the singular moment of the pandemic. The exhibition *Waves Between Us* reflects on Cavarero's claim that distance is measured "with the meter of the voice, not the meter of the eye". In this exhibition, the intent is to explore in the artistic practice of all the participant artists, their way of exploring sound and water as transmission modality and connectivity network²⁵⁴.

Together with Binta Diaw, nine other artists participated in the exhibition. Binta and two other artists were commissioned to create a site-specific work for the event. Diaw creates an installation entitled *Uati's Wisdom*, inspired by the West African deity and goddess of water, *Mami Wata*. The artist was inspired by ancient African matriarchal traditions and the communities who worshipped this figure and were manipulated by colonisers and missionaries who sought to deprive women of power and self-governance. The artist created inside the gallery a sort of sanctuary dedicated to this non-Western siren known for embodying rituals, sacred ceremonies, and threatening men as a sea monster. The artist's choice of materials underlines the importance of hair for African and black women. Indeed, her sculptural installation is a sort of body extension made of synthetic hair that, with its impressiveness, seeks to challenge and subvert the power structures of white supremacy and white privilege that treat black women as bodies to be invaded and controlled. In the artwork, *Mami Wata's* invocation aims to overcome the boundaries of time and geography, and together with the evocation in the title of the ancient Egyptian word for ocean water (*Uati*), the artist forms a physical and commemorative network that celebrates radical traditions of African matriarchy²⁵⁵.

²⁵⁴ *Waves Between Us*, exhibition booklet (Guarene, Palazzo Re Rebaudengo, 3 October-13 December 2020), pp. 1-26, here p.1; <https://fsrr.org/mostre/waves-between-us/> [last access 29 April 2022].

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, here pp. 14-15.



Figure 70, Binta Diaw, *Uati's Wisdom*, 2020, extension hair, photo © Domenico Conte, courtesy of the artist

This work *Uati's Wisdom*, along with some works from the series *Transfer*, the artist participated also at *Mediterranea Biennial 19* of 2021. From the same year are many other projects in which the artist was featured, one of them was the exhibition *It is not Wrong to Go Back and Take Something You Forgot*.

The exhibition is part of *Una Boccata D'Arte*, a contemporary art project diffused in all Italian regions which promotes the encounter between contemporary art and the historical and artistic beauty of Italy's most evocative hamlets. The project is promoted by Fondazione Elpis (a young foundation set up in 2020 with the intent of supporting young emerging artists coming from different countries and cultures) in collaboration with Galleria Continua (an important contemporary art gallery founded in 1990 in San Gimignano, which now has numerous locations around the world including Rome, Beijing, La Habana, São Paulo, Les Moulins, Paris and Dubai) and the participation of Threes Productions (an agency focused on cultural sustainability in the field of music, art and landscape, based in Milan). Every year, twenty hamlets (with a

population of less than five thousand) are selected to become the venue for a dialogue between the artistic paths created by the artist and the environment. Binta Diaw was invited to intervene in the hamlet of Monastero Bormida, situated in the province of Asti, Piedmont²⁵⁶.

The title of the exhibition is referred to the Sankofa symbol attributed to the Akan ethnic group (diffused especially in West Africa like Ghana), and it means “go back to the roots to move forward”. This is the key to understanding the sculptural path created by Diaw, which was made of outdoor installations, some of them durable and other ephemeral. The path started on the bank of the Bormida river with a temporary installation made of earth and salt that was progressively carried away by the water. The installation, *Untitled*, depicted a series of upturned keels of stylized boats which evoked the crossing of the Mediterranean and the people who face this who are deprived of their humanity²⁵⁷.

On the Romanesque bridge, built by the Benedictine monks and crucial to the salt route, is the former customs house now dedicated to the Madonna. Here the artist installed the symbol of Mother Earth, *Àdduna*, Akan goddess of creation²⁵⁸.



Figure 71, Binta Diaw, *Àdduna*, 2021, sculpture, iron, paint, approx. 120 x 100 cm, photo credits: Agnese Bedini, ©info@fondazioneelpis.it, courtesy of the artist

²⁵⁶ Monastero Bormida | Mostra "*It Is Not Wrong To Go Back and Take Something You Forgot*" di Binta Diaw, in Monastero Bormida Municipality official website, 23 June 2021; <https://www.comune.monasterobormida.at.it/it/events/monastero-bormida-mostra-it-is-not-wrong-to-go-back> [last access 2 May 2022].

²⁵⁷ G. D’Oria, P. Clerico, *It Is Not Wrong To Go Back and Take Something You Forgot*, 2021; <https://unaboccatadarte.it/en/editions/ba2021/binta-diaw-monastero-bormida-piemonte/> [last access 2 May 2022].

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

The visit continued in the market square of the hamlet which was a fundamental space for the salt route. Here the artist installed *Bunt Topatoo ak Khëwuel* (the gate of care and abundance) which is a gate as reference to the theme of hospitality with the symbols of the kola nut (power and commerce) and *Aban* (fortress and safe place)²⁵⁹.



Figure 72, Binta Diaw, *Bunt Topatoo ak Khëwuel*, 2021, sculpture, iron, paint, salt dough, approx. 450 x 320 cm, photo credits: Agnese Bedini, ©info@fondazioneelpis.it, courtesy of the artist

The work is covered with salt paste which was an intervention created with the children of the summer camp in Monastero to investigate the importance of salt over the centuries. Walking around the castle, there is the tower which is connected with the castle by an arch. In that point, Diaw installed *Ame Dine*, a long stair that ends in emptiness, which for the *Akans* is a symbol of ethics and faith whereas in the courtyard of the former monastery, inside the well, stands *Kham Kham*, a work composed of two symbols representing knowledge and wisdom²⁶⁰.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.



Figure 73, Binta Diaw, *Ame Dine*, 2021, sculpture, iron, paint, approx. 400 x 50 cm, photo credits: Agnese Bedini, ©info@fondazioneelpis.it, courtesy of the artist



Figure 74, Binta Diaw, *Kham Kham*, 2021, sculpture, two elements, iron, paint, approx. 65 x 65 cm each, photo credits: Agnese Bedini, ©info@fondazioneelpis.it, courtesy of the artist

At the foot of an arch in the ancient cloister there was instead the *Sankofa*. *Dellu Cossan* represents a bird looking at its tail and is formed by a series of curves as the return is not a straight line. It is the outline of a history and a symbol of identity for

many African diasporas. Sankofa takes us back to the origins, the past, the traditions, and the beginning of the journey²⁶¹.



Figure 75, Binta Diaw, *Dellu Cossan*, 2021, sculpture, iron, paint, approx. 120 x 80 cm, photo credits: Agnese Bedini, ©info@fondazioneelpis.it, courtesy of the artist

An interesting aspect of this exhibition underlined by Diaw and the curator D’Oria was that the symbols presented over the path are very similar to Western decorations.

The fact of having represented an African language in a small Italian town is an extremely interesting way to create a dialogue between two worlds that are only apparently completely different; the symbols demonstrated this with their similarity to Western culture.

In 2021, at the Gallery Art of Temple University Rome, the artist had also a solo exhibition entitled *In Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* in collaboration with the Giampaolo Abbondio gallery and concomitant with the city's contemporary art festival *Rome Art Week*. The show presented fifteen photographic works from the *Paysage Corporels* series which reflects on the artist’s personal identity. Diaw has always asked herself questions about her identity like “Who am I?” very simple questions yet so difficult to answer due to the fact of being an Italian black woman born and raised in a predominantly white environment. She strongly believes in diversity and inclusion and for this reason she tries through her artistic practice to deconstruct and question identity and to explore her position as a black woman in the western world, trying to

²⁶¹ Ibid.

find an equilibrium between her Italianness and Africanness without renouncing either²⁶².

Her works, besides interrogate on different levels of her identity as Afro-Italian woman in a Europeanised world, also make us reflect on our own identity as a continuous crossroads of histories and geographies. The title of the exhibition was inspired by Silvia Federici, sociologist, philosopher, and activist whose research has focused on themes such as feminism, gender studies and in particular on the role of the body in the political and social environment.²⁶³



Figure 76, Binta Diaw, *Paysage Corporel V*, 2020, chalk on giclée print on 100% cotton paper mounted on dibond, 145 x 110 x 5 cm, courtesy of the artist

Another project in which the artist took part in 2021 was the residency *Collective Practices: A Living Experience of Feeling Listened* promoted by Lungomare. Lungomare is a cultural association founded in 2003 in Bolzano with the aim of

²⁶² In *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Binta Diaw*, in Temple University official website, 2021; <https://events.temple.edu/rome-gallery-exhibition-in-beyond-the-periphery-of-the-skin> [last access 2 May 2022].

²⁶³ Binta Diaw in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, in Rome Art Week official website, 2021; <https://romeartweek.com/it/eventi/?id=3804&ida=1165> [last access 2 May 2022].

creating projects that explore relations between architecture, urbanism, design, and art translating this research into different formats: public discussions, conferences, publications, exhibitions, and interventions in public space characterised by the intention of interacting with the cultural and socio-political processes of the territory in which Lungomare operates. Currently, the association's activities are focused on long-term residency projects, a format through which the association invites guests to interact and confront themselves with the South Tyrolean context²⁶⁴.

Binta Diaw began her residency in May 2021 through which the artist designed a project of three collective practices in which to involve people and create a dialogue on the reality of their local territory. The starting point for the project was the unfinished text by the politician and activist Alexander Langer entitled *Südtirol ABC Sudtirolo*, which is structured starting from a list of key words that the author has thought of as a sort of language to narrate and describe the past and the reality of South Tyrol at his time. Foreign elements, ethnic, mixed, prejudice are just some of the words presented in this text from the late 1980s, but very topical for contemporary debates on culture, identity and living together. The artist chose some of the terms from the text to re-examine them in a different way, in order to reflect on and question the current South Tyrolean territory. Through the audio, video and photographic material collected during the collective practices, the artist will work on the creation of a new contemporary spelling book²⁶⁵.

The first collective practice was *The Land of Our Birth Is a Woman*, which involved only women with a migration background, residing in different cities of South Tyrol. The meeting included the realization of a collectively sewn patchwork. The idea behind this activity was to discuss the figure of marginalised women's bodies and the deconstruction of stereotypical, patriarchal, and Eurocentric representations of them. The symbolism of sewing together different pieces of fabric was linked to the idea of an ancestral practice that has always involved women and that in this case wanted to symbolise the unification of women from different communities²⁶⁶.

²⁶⁴ About Lungomare association; <http://www.lungomare.org/archive/it/progetto/artist-in-residence-2021-con-binta-diaw/> [last access 3 May 2022].

²⁶⁵ Lungomare Residency 2021: Binta Diaw; <http://www.lungomare.org/archive/it/progetto/artist-in-residence-2021-con-binta-diaw/> [last access 3 May 2022].

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

The second collective practice was entitled *We are Potluck*. The potluck is a meal in which all the guests participate in cooking something that is then shared with everyone. Indeed, in this case the meeting consisted of a collective dinner that was cooked by several hands using many different ingredients. The choice of this activity was because food and cooking is a practice shared by all communities around the world and the idea was to emphasise the importance of sharing. The last practice, *Living Young, Wild and Free*, was instead dedicated to the experience of second-generation young people in South Tyrol, who were invited to discuss and reflect on some key words from Langer's text in relation with their biographies²⁶⁷. The residency ended with an exhibition in which the artist showed some of her works.

Also in 2021, Binta Diaw was featured in a project entitled *The Unarchivable. Colonial roots decolonial routes* (the exhibition has been extended into May 2022) promoted by the Goethe-Institut in Rome. The exhibition is curated by Viviana Gravano and Giulia Grechi and presents along with Diaw, also the artworks of other five international artists: Luca Capuano and Camilla Casadei Maldini, Leone Contini, Délio Jasse, an Afro-Italian artist already mentioned during the second chapter, and Emeka Ogboh.

The concept of the exhibition started from the consideration of the traces of colonialism that still affect our present lives without being adequately discussed in environments such as museums, urban space but also on the level of the language; namely, in the normality of everyday life and it is precisely this condition of unquestioned normality that makes it so difficult to eradicate the legacy of colonialism. The complexity of colonial construction and its ongoing transformation into an all-pervasive colonial condition cannot be contained in an archive. Something exceeds the archive as such and remains non-archivable, challenging the archive itself as means of narrating and controlling our memory and identity. Tools of representation have been and are currently a powerful vehicle for the creation of these traces, of visual stereotypes that have been alive. The question is: how to get rid of them? The first offensive weapon of colonisation was the appropriation of the imaginaries of the colonised. Art understood as cultural activism is a possible solution, however it must first learn to confront its own history. Indeed, Western art history has too often ignored

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

the racism and stereotyping in its own canonical imagery. It is therefore necessary to restart from a decolonial reading of the history of our arts by openly addressing some of the European art's foundational myths that have contributed to produce, together with the coloniser, the archives of racialized and racist images which has been taken then as universal value worldwide. What we are asked to then, according to the curators, is to consider this unarchivable archive in order to shed light on the archive itself, its functioning and its dark side, perhaps to deconstruct the system of the archive itself as memorial device²⁶⁸.

For this occasion, the artist presented the installation *Nero Sangue*, which was already presented for the exhibition at Palazzo Re Rebaudengo in Turin in 2020. The installation fits perfectly into the show as the artist worked in some Italian archives recognizing that, in the words of the artist, “a large part of the history of humanity has been hidden, not included in Italian textbooks, and not recognized by Italian institutions”²⁶⁹. Through her work the artist highlights the fact that the process of invisibilisation of certain histories concerns the past but also the present. The archive of the past is represented in the installation by the *Transfer* series in which the artist decontextualises the black bodies depicted in the fascist magazine *La difesa della razza*, transferring them onto cotton to give them back their humanity, subjectivity, and dignity. Between the past and the present there is the sound installation in which Afro-descendants tell the history's violence by reading the verses of the Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, which becomes a collective chorus demanding justice and reparation. The present instead is represented by black tomatoes, a common object on our tables, evoking the bodies of all the enslaved and racialised immigrants in the Italian countryside. Tomatoes, just like immigrants, are alive, in constant transformation, but their very being organic also determines their fragility²⁷⁰.

Another exhibition in which the artist participated between 2021 and 2022 was *Les Filons Géologiques*, in which Victor Fotso Nyie, mentioned in the previous section, was also present. Here, Diaw exhibited the work *Black Powerless II*.

²⁶⁸ V. Gravano, G Grechi, *The Exhibition*, in *The Unarchivable. Colonial roots decolonial routes*, exhibition catalogue (Rome, Goethe Institut Rom, 26 October 2021- 18 May 2022), 2021; <https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf238/catalogo-it-en-tka-doppia-pagina-bassarisoluzione-v1.pdf> [last access 4 May].

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.



Figure 77, Binta Diaw, *Black Powerless II*, 2021, Silicone, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

This work is part of a series the artist began in 2017 with *Black Powerless*. Both works depict silicone fist casts of Afro-descendant individuals. For this series, the artist started by thinking about her personal condition as a "second generation" person and that of all the other numerous children of the first wave of migrants born and raised in Italy. According to Italian law, these children must wait until the age of eighteen to apply for citizenship. The work therefore aimed to highlight the significant presence of Afro-descendants in the country who are invisible to the nation and therefore, their condition of not having any power in their own country as they are not even legally recognised as part of it. For this reason, in both *Black Powerless* and *Black Powerless II*, the artist has depicted fists reminiscent of the famous political symbol of black pride born in the early 1960s, black power, but in this case positioned upside down to indicate that these fists have no power. Furthermore, the choice of the material, silicone, is significant as it is a wet material in contrast to the consistent violence exercised in Italy towards Afro-descendant people. In *Black Powerless* the artist represented her moulded arm hung by a hook whereas in *Black Powerless II* there are numerous silicone casts of fists of Afro-descendants always pointing downwards to indicate their impotence. These artworks, therefore, as other that we saw from the artist, explores identity issues like blackness and Italianness in the social, political, and contemporary Italian context²⁷¹.

²⁷¹ *Black Powerless*, in Binta Diaw official website; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/blackpowerless/> [last access 3 May 2022].



Figure 78, Binta Diaw, *Black Powerless*, 2017, Silicone and hook, courtesy of the artist

A recent collective exhibition in which the artist will be present is *Segni di me. Il corpo, un palcoscenico* inaugurated on April 2022 and closed on 25 June 2022 at Casa Testori.

Casa Testori is a cultural hub located near Milan, precisely in Novate Milanese, in the birthplace of the Italian intellectual Giovanni Testori, writer, playwright, painter, art critic, poet, director, and actor. The aim of the association is the production and promotion of contemporary art, focused especially on young artistic productions²⁷².

The exhibition features six female artists born between 1985 and 1995 whose works focus on the theme of the relation with body. The show is conceived as a kind of theatre piece thanks to the artists' diverse artistic contributions with painting, sculpture, photography, performance, and drawing. In the exhibition there are powerful and provocative works which criticise the painful legacy of sexism, violence and other power structures in contemporary culture. Together with the artworks of the six young artists, there is also a series of drawing from the mid- 1970s by Giovanni Testori which have the female body as their subject. Moreover, the event also presents some works

²⁷² Chi siamo, in Casa Testori official website; <https://www.casatestori.it/chi-siamo/> [last access 4 May 2022].

by the Italian artist Carol Rama in whose paintings the female figure has always been central²⁷³.

For this exhibition, the artist decided to present some works from the *Paysage Corporels* series, which fit perfectly into the exhibition concept. The female body, and in particular the black body that the artist present to us, bears many signs, signs of the pain but also of the joy it experienced and the struggles it has made. The female body thus becomes the ground of resistance, power and act²⁷⁴.

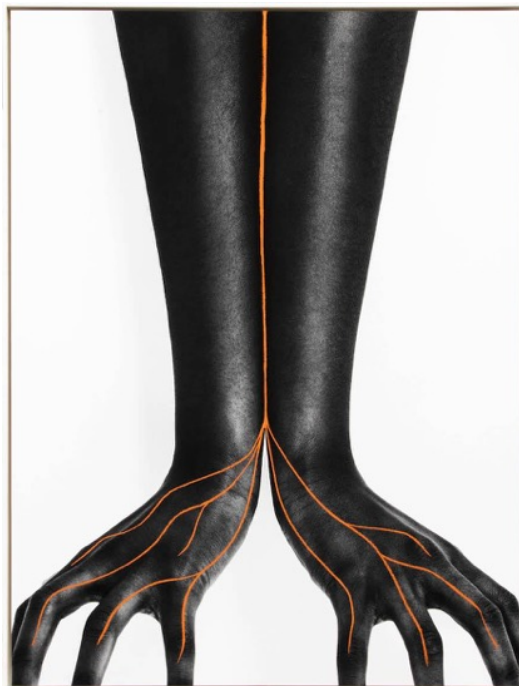


Figure 79, Binta Diaw, *Paysage Corporel VI*, 2020, chalk on giclée print on 100% cotton paper mounted on dibond, 70 x 105 cm, courtesy of the artist

Since the artist finished her study path in 2019, she has also had several exhibitions abroad. One was held at the Savvy Contemporary art gallery, in Berlin in 2019. It was a collective exhibition entitled *Soil Is an Inscribed Body. On Sovereignty and Agropoetics* in which the artist presented for the first time the installation *Chorus of Soil*. In those years indeed, the artist was interested in working with archive material from which she discovered some photographic images that led her reflect on the link

²⁷³ *Segni di me. Il corpo come palcoscenico*, in Casa Testori official website; <https://www.casatestori.it/2022/03/28/segni-di-me-il-corpo-come-palcoscenico/> [last access 4 May 2022].

²⁷⁴ *Paysage Corporels* series, in Binta Diaw official website; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/paysagescorporels/> [last access 4 May 2022].

between the slave trade and contemporary migration. With this installation, therefore, the artist created a space of memorialization dedicated to all those people who lost their lives during the crossing, but also at the same time a space of new life, as the seeds planted in the ground and the buds growing can prove. Moreover, the soil is important as a material for the artist because it is a living entity and according to the artist we, as human beings, are particularly connected to the soil because we were born in it and it lives in our body, in what we eat and drink²⁷⁵.

In 2021, Diaw was also featured in a solo exhibition at the Cécile Fakhoury gallery in Abidjan, in Ivory Coast. The gallery, which now represents the artist, opened in 2012 in Abidjan but in the following years also inaugurated new spaces: one in Dakar and in Paris in 2018 and another exhibition space in Paris in 2021²⁷⁶.

The exhibition *Diàspora* took the name from the artwork which appears as a black wave floating a few centimeters above of the ground.



Figure 80, Binta Diaw, *Diàspora*, 2021, extension hair, rice plants, installation view, courtesy of the artist

For this exhibition, the artist dives into the rich history of African hair braiding and its centrality in the transmission of vernacular knowledge. Considering the recent debates on the notion of cultural appropriation, African hair indeed are very present in the field of cultural studies in recent decades. Binta Diaw was inspired for this exhibition by the practice of braiding by African women in plantations. It was a common practice to transform the patterns of their hair ornaments into cryptic cartography of the routes of

²⁷⁵ *Chorus of Soil*, in Binta Diaw official website; <https://www.bintadiaw.com/chorusofsoil/> [last access 6 May 2022].

²⁷⁶ About Cécile Fakhoury gallery, in Cécile Fakhoury official website; <https://cecilefakhoury.com/en/a-propos/> [last access 6 May 2022].

marronage; those secret paths shared between slaves to escape the plantation. Sometimes their hair also contained seeds of the homeland at the heart of the weave, in hopes of scatter them again in a condition of freedom. The title of the exhibition, diaspora, whose common meaning describes the dispersion of people in the world, for this installation also assumes an organic meaning, the one of seed's dispersion and with them, those of a culture of the earth, of a know-how and of the circulation of a living memory. This immersive experience was also conceived as a collaborative work realized with Ivorian braiders²⁷⁷.



Figure 81, Binta Diaw, *Diaspora*, 2021, extension hair, rice plants, installation view, courtesy of the artist

Another recent exhibition abroad in which the artist took part was *Les tirés ailleurs* in 2022, at the ChertLüdde gallery in Berlin in which the artist worked again with soil and plants to realize an environment installation titled:

- 1.
- 12.
- 44.

²⁷⁷ D. Lopez, text for *Diaspora* exhibition, in Cécile Fakhoury official website; <https://cecilefakhoury.com/en/exhibitions/69-dia-s-p-o-r-a-binta-diaw/overview/> [last access 6 May 2022].



Figure 82, Binta Diaw, *Les tirés ailleurs*, 2022, soil, corn plant, *chéchia* hat, sound piece, installation view at ChertLüdde/Bungalow, photo credits: Andrea Rossetti, courtesy of the artist

The installation consists of soil, sound, corn stalks and a hat typically worn by the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, men who were enlisted in various conflicts by the French army corps during French colonial rule in West Africa. The title refers to a specific date, namely the first December 1944 when the French command carried out a massacre of an entire army transit camp in Thiaroye, in Senegal and its vertical presentation refers to a computational column, reminiscent of the continuous calculation of the uncertain number of the victims from that day. The graphic spacing wanted also to underline the many unknown burial grounds of the massacre's victims. The installation for the exhibition is quite complex and it brings together several elements of this sad story. The soil is divided into tracks commonly used in agriculture to allude from one hand to the fact that many of the *Tirailleurs* were farmers by profession and on the other hand, to rows of war trenches and the soil's universal symbolism of origin and belonging. In this version of the installation, on the soil there is a red hat, a *chéchia*, from the uniform of the *Tirailleurs*, and chosen by the French for the armies, which remained a typical item of Senegalese clothing since the end of the 19th century. On this hat, there is a corn plant growing alluding to the fact that corn was a common food for these soldiers. The installation is also accompanied by a sound installation which is the result of an archival research made by the artist in the Military Museum of Senegal together with Mr. Koné, an expert in Senegalese military history. The sound installation reports various sources and documents like lists of names of people wrongly put on trial and prosecuted and court documents presenting the event occurred

which reveals to be inaccurate to the actual events which unfolded. In addition, there is also the combination of the script with the sound of a typical Guinean flute. This sound piece was written and performed by the musician Dudù Kouate who is part of a lineage of storytellers known as griots. This oral tradition of documentation is a musical form commemorating and preserving significant moments of a community. Traditionally, a griot keeps records of all the births, deaths, marriages through the generations of the village or family, thus playing an important role in African societies. Their role is necessary for the transmission of historical facts, as a living existence-archive who preserves genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people. In the context of the exhibition, this tradition represents the possibility of transmitting orally the truth which might have otherwise been lost in the inaccuracies of written documentation²⁷⁸.



Figure 83, Binta Diaw, *Les tirés ailleurs*, 2022, soil, corn plant, chéchia hat, sound piece, installation hat detail, photo credits: Andrea Rossetti, courtesy of the artist

²⁷⁸ J. Chert, *Les tirés ailleurs*, in ChertLüdde official website; <https://chertluedde.com/bungalows/binta-diawles-tires-ailleursbungalow-berlin5-march-9-april-2022/> [last access 6 May 2022].

Despite the artist's very young age, her artistic practice demonstrates great awareness and maturity. In many examples of the works presented above, it is clear that there is a deep research behind the creation of a work, as in the case of *Les tirés ailleurs* in which she recalls a tragedy occurred in Senegal during the WWII, or in the case of *Diàspora* through which she presents the common practice of braiding hair by enslaved black woman to suggest maps for escaping from plantations, or *Chorus of Soil* which is a reconstruction of an 18th-century slave ship. Her maturity is also manifested in her mastery of the use of multiple materials such as silicone, earth fabric or chalk, through different modalities and techniques such as photography, installation and sound installation or sculpture. She therefore experiments with different media to convey always profound but also delicate topics through works of great visual impact. She is a young artist who has much to communicate to the public and does so with determination and consciousness. Her works also represent a voice of denunciation for the injustices and issues of particular interest related to her country, Italy, which still struggles to recognise and respect the Afro-descendant presence in its territory. Indeed, the artist also tries through his artistic communication, to invite the public to get to know and approach Africanness, aspects of its culture and history.

3.3 Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti

Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti was born in 1979 in Kinshasa, at the time Zaire, now Democratic Republic of the Congo. He arrived in Italy at five years old, adopted by an Italian family who lived in Brianza where he grew up and where he currently lives and works.

He has an education background as an advertising graphic designer, and he has never studied art. His approach to painting was self-taught, started as an emotional outburst and a way of expressing himself. He was a young boy in a white Italy which was not very attentive to integration or to the dynamics linked to migration and racism therefore, he started to pour his thoughts on these issues into paintings.

His first collective exhibition was held inside his high school, the Carlo Emilio Gadda Institute of Advertising Graphics in Milan, where he had the opportunity to confront himself with an audience for the first time. In 2002, he received his first proposal for a collaboration from a gallery owner who had seen the artist's paintings on the streets

(he actually started to present his works on the streets of Milan) and was impressed by his portraits. Thanks to this encounter, Veggetti entered the world of art galleries. The impact was not easy for the artist who was not used to the dynamics of a gallery, but rather he was used to work independently. With commissions the artist felt he had become a kind of production machine and he missed the relational aspect with the public, so in 2003 he returned to work independently. In 2006, however, the artist was contacted by a collector, Aurelio Stragapede, who had opened a gallery in Milan, the Stragapede Perini Contemporanea, a space the artist fell in love with. Since then, Kanku Veggetti has remained within the circuit²⁷⁹.



Figure 84, Christopher Kanku Veggetti, courtesy of the artist

It was exactly the Stragapede Perini gallery that hosted the first solo show of the artist entitled *Moving Textures* in 2006. The artworks exhibited on that occasion were characterised by visions constructed in formats of small overlapping textures or rather fragments of reality artfully recomposed. In those works, the artist combined photographic collage with painting, creating images with a strong symbolic and narrative charge in order to propose the dramatic relation between being and appearing. The artist proposed this theme in a very personal way, playing on a dialectic of appearance and essence also at a visual level. Indeed, the works viewed from afar

²⁷⁹C. Galal, *The Representation Of Afro-descendants In Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku's Paintings*, in "Griot", 16 March 2020; <https://griotmag.com/en/the-representation-of-afro-descendants-in-luigi-christopher-veggetti-kankus-paintings/> [last access 4 May 2022].

gave the spectator a specific vision whereas when viewed up close, they revealed other realities also with polemical and uncomfortable meanings²⁸⁰. The artist used printed papers with different motifs and decorations to reassemble the final pictorial subject. As in “Untitled”, he portrayed the faces of black children with the scales of newspaper figures underneath their complexions, with modulated images of food and drink. The artist wanted to create a contrast refereeing to the opposition of the West and Third World poverty, namely wealth versus misery²⁸¹.

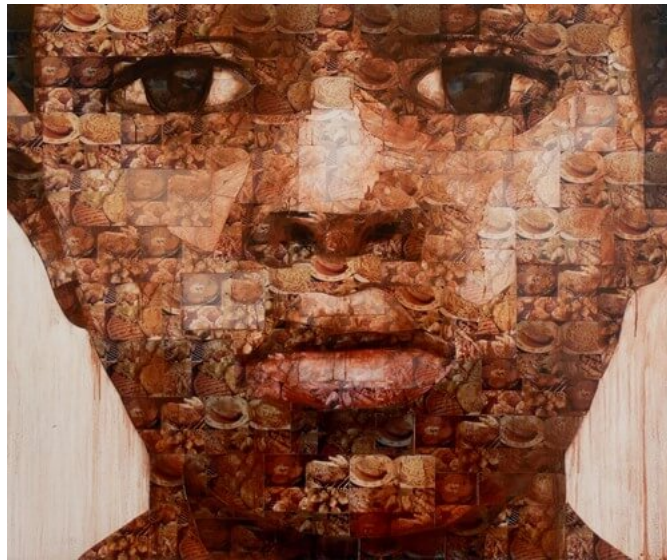


Figure 85, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, *Untitled*, 2006, collage and oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist

The artist's early works, as himself states, were intended to represent Africa, but were always done in dramatic tones. Gradually, his paintings softened up through the depiction of women, their strength, and their beauty. He then moved on to the representation of cities, choosing urban settings that were finally beginning to welcome new Italians or scenes of already cosmopolitan metropolis²⁸². The representation of cities was another way of talking about Afro-Italianness. He started

²⁸⁰ Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku – Moving Textures, in “Exibart”, 4 May 2006; <https://www.exibart.com/evento-arte/luigi-christopher-veggetti-kanku-moving-texture/> [last access 4 May 2022].

²⁸¹ G. Bria, *fino al 6.VI.2006 Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku Milano, Stragapede & Perini*, in “Exibart”, 5 June 2006; <https://www.exibart.com/altrecitta/fino-al-6-vi-2006-luigi-christopher-veggetti-kanku-milano-stragapede-perini/> [last access 9 May 2022].

²⁸² C. Galal, *The Representation Of Afro-descendants In Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku’s Paintings*, in “Griot”, 16 March 2020; <https://griotmag.com/en/the-representation-of-afro-descendants-in-luigi-christopher-veggetti-kankus-paintings/> [last access 9 May 2022].

his works on cities with Forte dei Marmi for which he also realised an exhibition in 2012 entitled *Forte dei Marmi*. For this exhibition the artist created thirty canvases depicting the city, an international tourism centre and glamorous destination in the history of Italy. The artist depicted key elements of the city like beachfront promenades, boats in the sea, the seashore, but in a very personal way. It was the first that Kanku Veggetti dealt with marine landscapes because he had never considered this subject as he was used to see it represented in a banal manner. From this town, Forte dei Marmi, the artist took the chance to approach this subject trying to find a different but also intimate key to reading it²⁸³.



Figure 86, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, *Sul pontile*, 2012, oil and acrylics on canvas, 33 x 48 cm, courtesy of the artist

Throughout his career, the artist has exhibited both his portraits and his landscapes in numerous galleries abroad, such as the Broadway gallery in New York (2009), the De Freo gallery in Berlin and Goteborg (2013 and 2015) or the Oil Gallery Hungerford, England. However, the artist has focused on exhibiting his works mainly in Italy, also thanks to the representation through Rubin gallery in Milan, with which he has been collaborating since 2010. Thanks to the support of this gallery, Kanku Veggetti has had the opportunity to exhibit his works all over Italy on several occasions, including prestigious ones, such as *ArteFiera* Bologna, where the artist has participated three

²⁸³M. Ambrogi, *Il pittore zairese che racconta Forte dei Marmi, al Fortino il mare e le marine di Veggetti Kanku*, in “Versilia Today”, 3 September 2012; <https://www.versiliatoday.it/2012/09/03/il-pittore-zairese-che-racconta-forte-dei-marmi-al-fortino-il-mare-e-le-marine-di-veggetti-kanku/> [last access 9 May 2022].

times, from 2017 until 2019. Regarding his participation in these editions of the art fair in Bologna, the artist recalls that when he participated, he was always the only Afro-Italian artist in the entire fair which is quite telling about the level of representation of this minority²⁸⁴.

In 2018 the artist, again through the Rubin gallery, took part in a peculiar project which involved a high school, in particular a catering and hotel management school, the Don Gnocchi Institute in Carate Brianza. The school in fact started a collaboration with the Rubin gallery in order to bring its artists within the institute and in particular in the didactic restaurant of the school to exhibit their works. In addition to studying subjects strictly related to catering, the school's students also study humanities subjects including art history. The school decided then to start this collaboration to enable students to have direct contact with contemporary art by regularly exhibiting some artworks in the room of the didactic restaurant and by meeting the artists during presentation events. The idea of linking art with cooking, according to the institute, arose from the fact that cooking, especially gourmet cuisine, is a kind of artistic practice in which the chef serves dishes in which he must pay attention to composition, colours exactly as an artist in a canvas. In this sense, students at the institute can draw inspiration from art for their culinary creations. Kanku Veggetti was invited to exhibit some of his works in the restaurant and to participate in a dinner prepared by the students, at the end of which he spoke about his artistic experience²⁸⁵. For the occasion, the artist presented several works including portraits and landscapes. *Blue Love* was one of these and represents a female portrait in which the artist, unlike his monochrome views, uses a much more vivid colour palette.

²⁸⁴ Source: Interview with the artist Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti on 10 May 2022.

²⁸⁵ L. Montecchi, J. Rubin, *LETTURE/ Il sapore dell'arte, il bello del cibo: Rubin e i cuochi del "don Gnocchi"*, in "ilsussidiario.net", 6 March 2018; <https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/cultura/2018/3/6/letture-il-sapore-dell-arte-il-bello-del-cibo-rubin-e-i-cuochi-del-don-gnocchi/809960/> [last access 11 May 2022].



Figure 87, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, Blue Love, 2018, acrylics on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, courtesy of the artist

Another of the artworks he exhibited from his landscapes series was *The crossroad, New York* representing a glimpse on a street of the city of which he tries to capture the frenetic rhythm and make the viewer perceive this idea of movement.



Figure 88, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, The crossroad, New York, 2017, oil and acrylics on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, courtesy of the artist

In the same year, the artist held his second solo exhibition at Rubín Gallery, entitled *Distanza e Appartenenza*. The exhibition featured ten canvases of different formats

with the classic themes he is attached to, namely portraits, crowded beaches and urban views plus an installation consisting of twenty-four panels depicting small cups. These ordinary objects, which the artist depicts in different colours and shapes, represent the uniqueness and identity of each individual, the personality of each of us and thus also the way we perceive ourselves²⁸⁶.



Figure 89, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, from the series *Che tazzina sei? Dentro ci sei thè*, 2018, oil and acrylics on canvas, courtesy of the artist

On larger canvases the artist instead presented landscapes and views like *Sardegna*, depicting a beach crowded with people. In these types of works, the palette of the artist is composed mainly of whites, greys, and blacks as if the artwork were an old photo, a memory. By choosing these only apparently limiting colours, the artist allows us to repaint the image with our mind, giving it all the colours of our own experiences. His canvases, his memories thus become our memories involving the viewer in the process of somehow making the work come alive in our minds. As in the case of the cups, the spectator is protagonist²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁶ S. Buffi, *Quando la pittura ha il sapore di quelle foto di vacanza degli anni Sessanta*, in “IlGiornaleOFF”, 24 September 2018; <https://www.ilgiornaleoff.it/2018/09/24/quando-la-pittura-ha-il-sapore-di-quelle-foto-di-vacanza-degli-anni-sessanta/> [last access 11 May 2022].

²⁸⁷ Ibid.



Figure 90, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, *Sardegna*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 50×125 cm, courtesy of the artist

In 2019, the artist created a very provocative artwork called *Salvini*²⁸⁸ *nero* which depicts a peculiar version of the Italian politician. Besides the creation of the painting, the artist also created a website called *salvininero.com* through which he promoted an online auction for a month whose proceeds were donated to a NGO. The work represents an Africanised Salvini in the guise of a priest: black face, Afro hair, wearing a cassock half in African fabrics and half in the colours of the peace flag, while behind him, in the background the words *Bella ciao* are repeated. According to the artist, the idea was to depict a very recurrent face that everyone knew at the time for the electoral posters and, through his face, to represent millions of people that think differently from him. The auction started from a zero base so that everyone could participate. Initially, a few small offers came in, then collectors, who knew the artist and appreciated his production, were interested in it but he was hoping to attract the attention of philanthropist, as the proceeds would have been donated. Also interesting is the reaction of the politician who before the official opening of the auction wrote a post on his Instagram page saying that he might be interested in participating in it. Once the official website was online and it was revealed exactly what *Salvini Nero* was, the politician was never heard from again.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Matteo Salvini is an Italian politician known especially for his political campaigns against immigration.

²⁸⁹ E. Mariani, *Veggetti, l'artista che ha fatto nero (e prete) Salvini*, in "Nuove Radici", 28 January 2020; <https://www.nuoveradici.world/cultura/veggetti-lartista-che-ha-fatto-nero-e-prete-salvini/> [last access 5 May 2022].



Figure 91, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, *Salvini Nero*, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, courtesy of the artist

This event-piece was intended to draw attention to a delicate thematic related to Italy which is immigration however, as the artist explained during an interview, the work did not get the media resonance it deserved. According to the artist this was the proof that the country has serious problem in dealing with certain issues like immigration²⁹⁰. Kanku Veggetti indeed affirmed:

I was expecting a strong response given the social and cultural context we live in. The figures that could have and should have supported this event in order to share the values at stake failed to come forward, no matter the support and the endorsements I had received earlier on. While the right wing, starting from the person I was addressing in the painting, was very careful and quietly started a discussion with me and my collaborators, there was no support from the left wing. The political and cultural faction that I thought was close to me in terms of ideas and sensibility proved not to have the courage to back the project till the end, acting incoherently for the umpteenth time. What's more, the fact that I declared from the very beginning that I would donate the profit of the auction to an NGO, made me realise how critical and controversial the topic of NGOs is, even for the

²⁹⁰ C. Galal, *The Representation Of Afro-descendants In Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku's Paintings*, in "Griot", 16 March 2020; <https://griotmag.com/en/the-representation-of-afro-descendants-in-luigi-christopher-veggetti-kankus-paintings/> [last access 9 May 2022].

left wing. Immigration, sea rescues, help for refugees and displaced people are issues that get exploited from both parts and the complete inability to deal with certain topics, including immigration, is now very clear²⁹¹.

In 2020, Kanku Veggetti participated in a project in collaboration with the Afro Fashion association for the Afro Fashion Week Milan. Afro Fashion is a non-profit association based in Italy and Cameroon, founded in 2015, focused on fashion, design and art. The association organises every year the Afro Fashion Week, in parallel with Milan Fashion Week, which showcases leading and emerging collections by African and Afro-inspired creators, encouraging investment in African and African-origin creative businesses²⁹².

On that occasion, Kanku Veggetti decided to contact one of the founders of the association, Akatu Maccarthy, proposing her to do something together for Afro Fashion Week 2020 edition. According to the artist it was a good opportunity to continue the pictorial discourse on Africa and Afro-Italianness through portraits. His intervention consisted in the realization of two artworks *Donna* and *Perla*, which served as the backdrop for the runway show. With the two paintings presented the artist wanted to celebrate African beauty in two different ways: *Donna*, a woman who is aware and proud of her beauty and therefore undoubtedly attractive, while *Perla*, a more shy, sweet, and simple beauty which is nonetheless charming.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Afro Fashion Week Milan, in Afro Fashion, official website; <https://afrofashion.org/events/afwm/> [last access 10 May].



Figure 92, Afro Fashion Week Milano, 2020, © Carlo Lesma

In the same year the artist held an exhibition at The-Office, in Milan. The-Office is a project by the artist and L&CM, a law firm established in 2018. During weekends the studio becomes the artist's atelier open to the public by appointment. During the year, the space also hosts cultural events in collaboration with private and institutional entities, with national and international artists as well²⁹³.

This first exhibition at The-Office, entitled *Sottopelle*, focused on the contemporary figure of the black Italian woman. Veggetti dedicated an exhibition to a nation that is still surprised that a black woman can be Italian, that a woman wearing a veil can be a daughter of this land. It was an event to testify the beauty made in Italy today, questioning purely Western canons, redefining the very concept of beauty. The intention of the works is to lead the observer to grasp and appreciate diversity because beauty, perception and personal sensitivity are also the result of education²⁹⁴.

In addition to highlighting the figure of black women in Italy, who is too often sidelined, the exhibition aimed to open up to a more general reflection on the

²⁹³ The-Office, in L&CM official website; <https://l-cm.it/the-office/> [last access 6 May 2022].

²⁹⁴ *Sottopelle*, in L&CM official website; <https://www.the-office.it/mostra-sottopelle/#sottopelle> [last access 6 May 2022].

iconographic and representative lack of black people in Italy. The idea for the project came about at a time of reflection on the fact that Italy is extremely multi-ethnic, and the exhibition aimed to highlight this diversity²⁹⁵.

The artist recalls a specific episode in which during an edition of *Artefiera* in Bologna, he was supposed to exhibit a portrait of a black woman which was eventually removed with the justification that the painting was not suitable for the context or that it would be difficult to sell it; the exhibition therefore wanted to overcome precisely these kinds of barriers and discriminatory visions²⁹⁶.



Figure 93, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *Untitled*, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 165 x 100 cm, courtesy of the artist

In the eight artworks showed the use of white is preponderant because the artist wanted to make these women stand out in the canvases. In fact, white represents the

²⁹⁵ E. Carosi, *SOTTOPELLE, nuove italiane: una mostra inclusiva*, in “Kube”, 2020; <https://www.kubeagency.com/post/sottopelle-nuove-italiane-una-mostra-inclusiva> [last access 6 May 2022].

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

predominantly white Italian context in which these women are embedded, but it is precisely their being black within a white context that makes their profile stand out²⁹⁷.



Figure 94, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *Levinia e Sandy*, 2020, oil and acrylics on canvas, 300 x 190 cm, courtesy of the artist

In this specific artwork, the artist compares two generations. Levinia, on the right is thirty years old, while Sandy, on the left is twenty. Their arms frame them but at the same time defend them. One thing is very different between the two women. Sandy's slanted gaze is full of pride, almost defiance of the today's young people, while Levinia has a more disillusioned look. She knows that every conquest takes time. However, one needs the other, both Sandy's strength and Lavinia's maturity are needed to face the reality. All the women portrayed in the canvases of this exhibition are of different ethnicities and are people known to the artist, others found on Instagram and others found in everyday places such as supermarkets²⁹⁸.

Also promoted with The-Office, the artist had another solo exhibition in 2021 entitled *50 volte Pescara* at the exhibition space Ceravento in Pescara. He realized fifty canvases to celebrate the city of Pescara by depicting its corners, squares, views and

²⁹⁷ M. Lussemburgo, *L'artista Veggetti Kanku che racconta l'afrodiscendenza in Italia nella sua ultima mostra è andato Sottopelle*, in "Nuove Radici", 23 October 2020; <https://www.nuoveradici.world/cultura/lartista-veggetti-kanku-che-racconta-lafrodiscendenza-in-italia-nella-sua-ultima-mostra-e-andato-sottopelle/> [last access 6 May 2022].

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

people trying to capture their essence. The artworks seem like photos represented mainly through small 10 x 15 cm canvases and then artworks of different formats²⁹⁹. 50 volte Pescara was the first stage of a broader project which will involve the artist in a journey throughout the country which will be concluded with a final exhibition narrating Italy, its landscapes, its people and culture through some cities from North to South³⁰⁰.

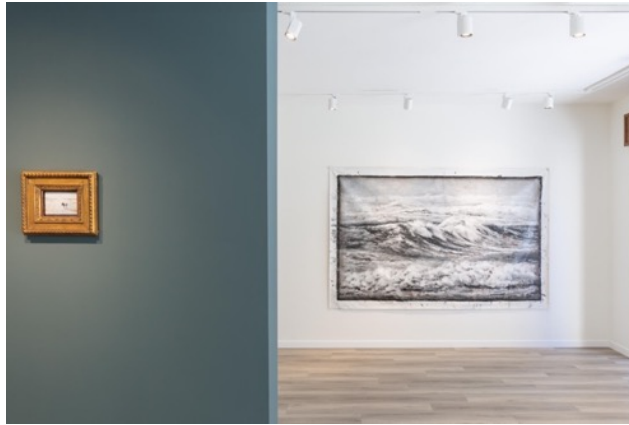


Figure 95, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, installation view, 2021, courtesy of the artist

In 2021, the artist had his first collaboration with a museum, the Mudec, an ethnographic museum in Milan. Indeed, two of his works entered the museum permanent collection³⁰¹. This event is significant for two reasons: firstly, despite the artist's fairly long career, which started in 2002, this was the first time for him working with a museum; secondly, it is significant that an institution decided to include the works of an Afro-Italian artist in its permanent collection, showing attention to the problem of poor visibility of Afro-Italian artists in the art system. However, the Mudec is an ethnographic museum, not a contemporary art museum which should be the principal institution interested in representing contemporary artists. The importance of this acquisition remains as it could inspire other contemporary art museums to recognise the presence of Afro-Italian artists.

²⁹⁹ *50 volte Pescara*, in The-Office official website; <https://www.the-office.it/50-volte-pescara/> [last access 6 May 2022].

³⁰⁰ Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *50 volte Pescara*, in Ceravento official website; <https://www.ceravento.it/luigi-cristopher-veggetti-kanku-50-volte-pescara/> [last access 6 May 2022].

³⁰¹ A. Gandolfi, *Dipinto nuovi Italiani neri, come me*, in "Corriere della Sera", 2 January 2022, in pressreader; <https://www.pressreader.com/italy/corriere-della-sera-la-lettura/20220102/281852941908357> [last access 9 May 2022].

The choice of works was also significant, as both are representative of issues that Italian society faces.

Una calda giornata di sole (A hot sunny day) depicts a field dotted with migrant labourers working under the system of *caporalato* of which also Binta Diaw talked about in her works. However, the title seems to suggest a better scenario, but this is precisely the provocation that the artist wanted to make: the painting indeed sheds light on the problem of *caporalato* and the fact that the State does not deal with it. If Italy does not deal with this problem, the artwork remains just the representation of a hot sunny day³⁰².



Figure 96, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *Una calda giornata di sole*, 2021, oil and acrylics on canvas, courtesy of the artist

Oggi per domani, on the other hand, represents Aida, a Muslim woman wearing the hijab. The red circle behind her head wants to recall the holy figure of the Madonna, often depicted with a golden halo. Here Aida has a red halo because, according to the artist, to make it gold too would be a stretch. Here the parallelism is intended to make us reflect on the figure of the Virgin Mary who is always represented with her veil compared to the figure of the Muslim woman wearing the hijab which, however, is often perceived as a threat³⁰³.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ M. Lussemburgo, *L'artista Veggetti Kanku che racconta l'afrodiscendenza in Italia nella sua ultima mostra è andato Sottopelle*, in "Nuove Radici", 23 October 2020;



Figure 97, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *Oggi per domani*, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 140 x 190 cm

The most recent project in which the artist is still involved is *Tricolore 2022*. This is not only an artistic but also a social project, as it aims to communicate a message of reflection on multicultural identity in Italy. The project was inaugurated in Venice on 20 January 2022 with an exhibition at Akka Project, a gallery that represents and supports artists from the African continent and its diaspora. After this initial stage, the exhibition continued on a tour in Italy with exhibitions in other spaces, including museums or galleries, but also schools. In fact, the artist stated that:

I like the idea of treating schools like museums and galleries, bringing art directly into institutions. The purpose of this event is to sensitize the individual, so I find it right to start from the base, disrupt the usual dynamics of art and enter the places where citizens begin to form and build their critical sense³⁰⁴.

In February, the project was presented at the Anthropology Day organised by the Bicocca University. On this occasion, in addition to the exhibition of some works, a debate was organised by the artist with two anthropologists from the university: Ivan

<https://www.nuoveradici.world/cultura/lartista-veggetti-kanku-che-racconta-lafrodiscendenza-in-italia-nella-sua-ultima-mostra-e-andato-sottopelle/> [last access 9 May 2022].

³⁰⁴ B. Zangbè, *Tricolore 2022*, in *Tricolore 2022* official website; https://www.tricolore2022.it/presentazione_ENG/ [last access 6 May 2022].

Bargna and Giovanna Santanera and the journalists Cristina Giudici and Matteo Matteini. The next stage came to Reggio Emilia from 19 to 20 March on the occasion of the international day against racism, and then from 28 April to 8 March the exhibition was on its fourth stage in the city of Barlassina, dedicated mainly to local schools. Participation in the event will remain open to allow municipalities, museums, galleries, cultural associations, and schools to take part in the project. For this reason, the various stages are communicated step by step by the *Tricolore 2022* project. The exhibition will also continue abroad, in South Africa, Brazil and the United States, where the project will end in January 2023 at the Florida Museum of Fine Arts³⁰⁵. The entire project was inspired by the famous Italian artwork *Le due madri* (1889) by Giovanni Segantini. The artist explained that:

While looking at Segantini's work at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan, I imagined an African mother with two children. I want to reiterate the importance of *ius soli*: while the woman in the picture is still part of the generation split between two countries because she emigrated, her two children were born here, so the youngest is depicted being carried by the mother in a traditional African way, but it's clear the girl goes to school and wears a uniform. Although she does not yet have citizenship, she is definitely Italian³⁰⁶.



Figure 98, Giovanni Segantini, *Le due Madri*, 1889, oil on canvas, 162,5 x 301 cm, Galleria D'Arte Moderna, Milan

The artist started from Segantini's work and created his version maintaining the same title and, exactly as the original one, depicting two maternities: the one of a woman

³⁰⁵ Tricolore 2022, in Tricolore 2022 official website; <https://www.tricolore2022.it> [last access 6 May 2022].

³⁰⁶ E. Mariani, *Veggetti's NFT digital art of the New Italians will go around the world*, in "Nuove Radici", 7 February 2022; <https://www.nuoveradici.world/english-version/veggettis-nft-digital-art-of-the-new-italians-will-go-around-the-world/> [last access 7 May 2022].

and the one of a cow with her little calf. However, as the artist affirmed, his reworking reflects the African motherhood with two children; one behind the mother wrapped in the traditional cloth and the other one, a daughter that she caresses while looking at the observer with sweet pride³⁰⁷.



Figure 99, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku *Le due madri*, 2021 digital painting, NFT, courtesy of the artist

Another painting that is part of *Tricolore 2022* is *Teenager*, which represents a black teenager making the common selfie face with her tongue out coloured in the colours of the Italian flag. Precisely the element of the tongue is important to the artist because it underlines the fact that one of the traits determining the identity of a person is the language spoken. In Italy, there are so many second generations who obviously speak Italian fluently, having been born in the country however, many people are still surprised that these generations can be considered “real Italians”. The tongue is also the organ connected to one of the five main senses, taste. Indeed, culture also passes through food and traditional dishes that identify a specific culture and origin. Therefore, communication and food are at the base of a nation³⁰⁸.

Another significant element of this work is that the girl wears an orthodontic appliance, the choice to include this detail was a way for the artist to underline the economic possibilities of her family as well as that of many other Afro-descendant families, a

³⁰⁷ B. Zangbè, *Tricolore 2022*, in *Tricolore 2022* official website; https://www.tricolore2022.it/presentazione_eng/ [last access 6 May 2022].

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

situation that many Italians think cannot exist as it remains the stereotype of the black person living precariously³⁰⁹.



Figure 100, Luigi Christopher Veggetti *Kanku, Teenager*, 2021, digital painting, NFT, courtesy of the artist

An interesting aspect of these two artworks is that they are totally digital. Indeed, with the NFT (Non-Fungible Token) format, the artist published his works on a blockchain network which certifies and protects the authenticity of his works. The digitalisation of some artworks was very interesting for the artist as it gave him the chance to easily have the same works in several places at the same time and of course this was perfect for the project idea of an itinerant exhibition like *Tricolore*. According to Veggetti, the interesting aspect of NFTs is that they are democratic, people only need a computer and anything else, so for the artist and his idea of talking about African heritage in symbolic but immediately understandable terms, NFT was the perfect way.

In addition to these digital works, the artist also included traditional canvases in the exhibition. One of these is *Salvini Nero* which was physically exhibited for the first time on the occasion of this project, but the show that started in Venice revealed many

³⁰⁹ E. Mariani, *Veggetti's NFT digital art of the New Italians will go around the world*, in "Nuove Radici", 7 February 2022; <https://www.nuoveradici.world/english-version/veggettis-nft-digital-art-of-the-new-italians-will-go-around-the-world/> [last access 7 May 2022].

other unpublished canvases like *Khaby Lame*, which is the portrait of the Afro-Italian influencer Khaby Lame who has become internationally famous in recent years thanks to his funny videos posted on social media, without forget important topics like Black Lives Matter³¹⁰. His image is very powerful because, besides being the second most followed Tiktoker in the world, he is also a black Italian guy raised in Italy who has conquered the internet representing his country, which paradoxically has not yet granted him citizenship.



Figure 101, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, Khaby Lame, 2021, oil and acrylics on canvas, 130 x 100 cm, photo of the author, courtesy of the artist

Khaby Lame, like all the other black Italians in the exhibition, is a testimony of the country's melting pot. Portraying Afro-Italians is a way of contributing to integration in the moment his artworks enter the house of a collector or a gallery because it brings

³¹⁰ Ibid.

people closer and accustoms them to a daily presence that can no longer be ignored as it is an integral part of Italianness, but which is still underestimated³¹¹.

In *A volte è dolce*, one of the canvases presented for this project, we see two faces, one black and the other white, representing the coexistence of two identities, the African and the Italian, in a single body. The artist expresses the attainment of an awareness of the existence of this duality that can be harmonious and balanced. The title, *A volte è dolce* (Sometimes it is sweet), refers precisely to the moment in which this awareness is reached, a pleasant, sweet moment in which one accepts and understands oneself to be both African and Italian³¹².

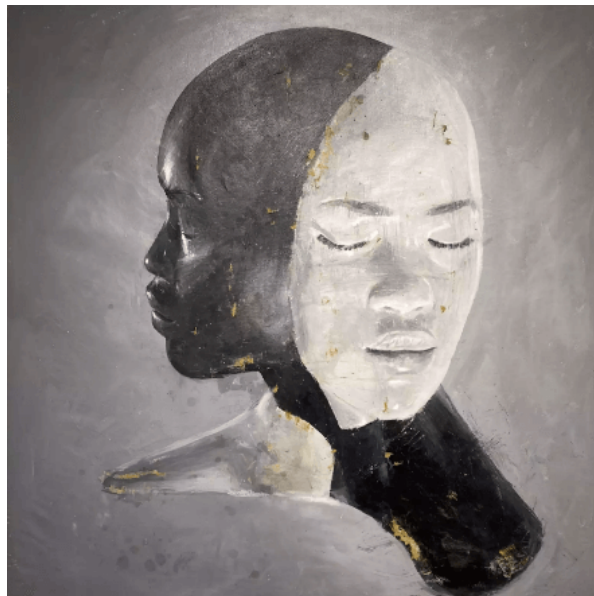


Figure 102, Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, *A volte è dolce*, 2021, oil and acrylic on paper, 185 × 185 cm, courtesy of the artist

Christopher Kanku Veggetti is an artist who, since the very beginning of his artistic career, has tried to speak about Afro-Italianness especially through portraits of black people. Painting started out as a personal need to express his emotions, but then turned into an educational tool to sensitise people of diversity and integration by exhibiting his works in a gallery or having them hung on the wall of private collectors, or by the conferences and exhibitions held in schools like the project in the Don Gnocchi

³¹¹ A. Gandolfi, *Dipingo nuovi Italiani neri, come me*, in “Corriere della Sera”, 2 January 2022, in pressreader; <https://www.pressreader.com/italy/corriere-della-sera-la-lettura/20220102/281852941908357> [last access 9 May 2022].

³¹² Source: E-mail communication with the artist Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti on 25 May 2022.

Institute or some legs of the itinerant project *Tricolore 2022* for which the artist has already brought his experience to students.

In addition to portraits, the artist has also focused his artistic practice on the depiction of landscapes and urban views of metropolises like New York, in which the artist perceives a greater visibility for Afro-descendants, or landscapes depicting some Italian cities to celebrate the beauty of the country, demonstrating his love for Italy.

3.4 Interviews with the artists: an insight on the presence of Afro-Italian artists in the Italian art system

In this last paragraph the three interviews conducted by the undersigned with Binta Diaw, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti and Victor Fotso Nyie will be presented.

The interviews focus on questions aimed at investigating the presence and inclusion of Afro-Italian artists in Italian art institutions and in the Italian art system in general. It was indeed interesting to get, through the interviews, a direct, internal and personal point of view from the artists themselves as they are the protagonists of the art system. Moreover, the three artists have different biographical, educational and career backgrounds, therefore it was interesting to note similarities and differences in their answers to the questions based on their personal experience.

The first question concerned the artists' experience with Italian institutions during their career. In this regard, Binta Diaw explained that she counts two collaborations with Italian institutions: the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation for the exhibition *Waves Between Us* (2020), her first collaboration with an institution, and the second soon in June, in which she will be involved in a group exhibition at the Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum (Madre) in Naples. For both cases, the artist emphasised the presence of a non-Italian curatorial team which, according to the artist, already has a more inclusive look and a tendency to look for artists who are not necessarily white. In the case of the Madre Museum, for instance, the curator of the exhibition will be the former director of the Centre Pompidou, Kathryn Weir, and for Diaw this aspect was decisive for her involvement in the exhibition project, precisely because of this

approach of openness to different artistic productions³¹³. As for her other experiences, they have all been mainly in non-institutional spaces, such as the collaboration with the Black History Month Florence, which have, in the artist's words, "an international approach". Regarding several other projects in which the artist has recently participated, Diaw affirmed: "they were always to show that there is a difference within the group, that is, they were not contextualised situations that had reasons to justify my presence. The intention was simply to give the black one a place"³¹⁴.

In addition, the artist stated that "institutions are in general difficult spaces in terms of accessibility" also for an age-related reason as many institutions generally prefer to represent artists with solid careers behind them rather than invest in young emerging artists. Diaw and second-generation artists like her are all young as they were born to immigrants who recently settled in Italy, so this system in which the focus is more on already established artists also unquestionably hampers young Afro-Italians who wish to work in the field of art³¹⁵.

Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti made a similar observation on the age factor and the influence that this has in determining whether an artist is represented or not in institutions. The artist stated that in the Italian context there are institutions which represent Afro-descendant artists, however these are often African Americans or artists from the African continent who already have some international attention thanks to a long and established career behind them. Italian Afro-descendant creatives, even those with years of experience in the field, do not enjoy the same attention.³¹⁶

Regarding his personal experience with Italian museums, the artist affirmed that it is very limited, despite being the elder artist with the longest career of the three. Kanku Veggetti stated that his unique collaboration with a museum was with the Mudec, an ethnographic museum of which the artist emphasised the openness in representing and giving visibility to different cultures, although he admitted that even this museum was late in approaching inclusiveness. According to the artist's personal experience: "Being represented in ethnographic and anthropological museums, which are linked to the presentation of world cultures, can in a way be an easier path to be represented

³¹³ Interview with Binta Diaw, 3 May 2022.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, 10 May 2022.

in museum institutions, this obviously speaking for the Italian context”³¹⁷. As for museum institution in general, for Kanku Veggetti they are rather far from an inclusive approach, because there is a problem related to the social perception of the Afro-Italian person, which is then reflected in the art system and all related fields³¹⁸.

Of a different opinion is artist Victor Fotso Nyie who claimed that: “museums and institutions are nurtured by a grassroots circuit such as art galleries, cultural associations, curatorial projects, fairs etc., which somehow contribute to the visibility of the artist, creating the conditions to attract institutions”³¹⁹. The artist underlined the presence of possibilities in the Italian territory, also recognising the effort of inclusiveness that some institutions are making, despite the limited scope of the phenomenon³²⁰.

Another question the three artists were asked was whether they know of any Italian realities dedicated exclusively to the representation of Afro-Italian artists.

Binta Diaw and Victor Fotso Nyie answered this question in the same way, both pointing to the Black History Month Florence association, discussed in the second chapter, as one of the most active entities in the country, if not the only one, in the representation of Afro-descendance in Italy. Diaw explained that BHMF was created precisely to address the lack of a physical space for Afro-descendants. The presence of such a space is obviously essential to give visibility to Afro-Italian artists currently working in the country, but it also represents a fundamental activity to lay the foundations for a reflection and debate on the issue of the representation of Afro-descendance in Italy, which will positively influence future generations of artists who will be able to find in such a place a reference point where they can feel represented and recognised.³²¹ Also referring to the BHMF, Fotso Nyie said that it is a well-structured project that includes various programmes such as artist residencies, collective and personal exhibition opportunities, conferences, and many other activities that celebrate black culture and constitute a great bridge between artists and institutions³²².

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Interview with Victor Fotso Nyie, 18 May 2022.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Interview with Binta Diaw, 3 May 2022.

³²² Interview with Victor Fotso Nyie, 18 May 2022.

Kanku Veggetti, in comparison to the other two artists, never had the opportunity during his career to come across an institution dedicated exclusively to the representation of Afro-Italian artists. However, he mentioned his collaboration with the Akka Project gallery (with which he started the ongoing *Tricolore 2022* project), a gallery exclusively dedicated to artists coming from the African continent.

Through this collaboration he represented an exception (and he hopes to be just the first in a series of exceptions) for the gallery which had never paid attention to Italian Afro-descendant artists.

Always referring to realities such as art galleries, the artist stated that he does not know of any at national level that deal with Afro-Italian artists, but he wanted to emphasise that a question of the art market also comes into play in this. According to him, the artworld too functions as an industry based on supply and demand: “As long as there is no demand for black or national African art, it is difficult to find Afro-descendant artists represented. Lately they have found more space in galleries, again because of the George Floyd issue and related events, so a gallery is more likely to be interested in representing an artist of African descent because it is a trend”³²³. However, the attention towards these events has already diminished and the small parenthesis that had been created no longer exists, and Afro-Italian artists begin to struggle again to be taken into consideration³²⁴.

The third question posed to the artists was whether being Afro-Italian had influenced their careers in any way. All agreed that to some extent the fact of being black has influenced their work. Diaw answered that: “From the moment you are not white, but a black artist and perhaps choose to speak on certain topics, there is a tendency to label you, which then results in you being excluded from certain circles because you are an uncomfortable presence or because there is no interest in having a certain positioning, even political”³²⁵. Both Kanku Veggetti and Victor Fotso Nyie while agreeing that being Afro-Italian artists can have a negative influence in terms of visibility, admit that being black has also been an added value. Kanku Veggetti for example, perceived many times his origins as a plus, an aspect that makes you more interesting even for the simple reason of being most of the time the only black person during events and

³²³ Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, 10 May 2022.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Interview with Binta Diaw, 3 May 2022.

exhibitions. However, the artist again emphasised what has already been said about market dynamics; for example, in his case, he mainly paints portraits of black people, for which there is not much demand in Italy. This is, on the one hand, an aspect that differentiates the artist from many others with an original artistic production, but at the same time it is a limitation due to the lack of demand for this type of production and consequently also leads to a lack of visibility³²⁶.

Victor Fotso Nyie, on the other hand, says that the fact that he was repeatedly judged because of his origins and his artistic production considered sometimes to be too 'African' or 'tribal', allowed him to strengthen his connection with his African roots³²⁷. At this point in the interview, it seems quite obvious that according to the three artists there is not enough representation of Afro-Italian artists in the Italian art system. It was interesting, however, to discuss with them possible solutions to face this underrepresentation, so the interviewees were asked what steps could be taken to improve the current situation.

According to Binta Diaw, an important first step would be to consider the artist in his or her individuality. In fact, several times during the interview, the artist stated that often Afro-descendant artists tend to be considered as a single thing, a homologated group producing only one type of art and dealing only with certain themes. This greatly penalises the artist who is not seen and appreciated for who she/he really is. Another important step could be taken by institutions doing research to catch up with the latest artistic practices, as well as introducing more collaborations with non-Italian and non-white people to create more stimulating networking³²⁸. In the opinion of Kanku Veggetti, the solution for a more inclusive representation could certainly start from museums, from ethnographic museums in changing their Eurocentric narratives, but also from the contemporary art museums in having more courage to initiate a more open and inclusive approach, helping other realities to follow this example³²⁹.

³²⁶ Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, 10 May 2022.

³²⁷ Interview with Victor Fotso Nyie, 18 May 2022.

³²⁸ Interview with Binta Diaw, 3 May 2022.

³²⁹ Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, 10 May 2022.

For Fotso Nyie, it would be important to work in terms of networking among Afro-descendants in order to create a solid and autonomous parallel system that would be able to be respected, without needing help³³⁰.

The last question deviates somewhat from the focus of the others, that is the representation of Afro-Italian artists, to investigate instead the issue of inclusiveness from the point of view of the audience. The question was in fact about the capacity of the Italian art system to offer services (in the sense of exhibitions, events, workshops etc.) to the public that take into account the multi-ethnic composition of the country or whether the target of these services is designed only for a white audience.

Binta Diaw immediately answered that: “Art is hardly accessible for us artists, imagine for communities!”. In her opinion, there is no attention to the level of inclusion of the different ethnic communities in Italy. Art in Italy is rather elitist and mostly addressed to a specific portion of the population, the white one³³¹.

Fotso Nyie and Kanku Veggetti in this regard responded in a very similar way by emphasising that the target audience is generally a white audience. However, both argued that there is sometimes a focus on a specific community given certain circumstances. Kanku Veggetti gave the example of the event of George Floyd's death which brought attention to the Italian Afro-descendant community, also helping to understand that the perception of society and the world is not one and only one, but there are multiple points of view to take into consideration. However, the sincere willingness to open up to inclusiveness is still some way off, but at least some small changes are taking place³³². A similar observation was made by Victor Fotso Nyie who pointed out that sometimes light is shed on minorities but in a hypocritical way, in relation to the events of the moment, outside of these parentheses of attention, the initiatives and services of the art system are not designed for these minorities³³³.

From the interview with the artists too, as in chapter two of this thesis, it emerged that there is not enough representation and visibility for the Afro-Italian artist community in Italian institutions and the Italian art system in general. The first question asking the artists about their experience with institutions reveals that all have had little contact

³³⁰ Interview with Victor Fotso Nyie, 18 May 2022.

³³¹ Interview with Binta Diaw, 3 May 2022.

³³² Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, 10 May 2022.

³³³ Interview with Victor Fotso Nyie, 18 May 2022.

with them during their careers. This also emerges in the rest of the chapter three, with the presentation of their artistic practice, through which it can be seen that they have only been present in contemporary art museums a few times. Most of the exhibitions and events in which they took part were promoted by organisations such as galleries, foundations or other entities that are sometimes not even primarily interested in contemporary art, as in the case of Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti, who had his only institutional collaboration with an ethnographic museum.

The second question was particularly interesting because, in conducting the research for this thesis, the aim was to understand what the channels of representation of Afro-Italian artists were and therefore also to understand whether there were spaces in the country dedicated exclusively to them. The answers of the interviewees confirmed the results of the research, namely that do not seem to exist any museums, galleries or other realities dedicated to Afro-descendants, apart from the Black History Month Florence association, which was also indicated by two artists as the only Italian cultural space dedicated to visual artists. A significant aspect to consider about this association, apart from the fact that it is the only space, is that it was not initiated by Italians but was founded by an African American artist and curator who has been living between Italy and the United States for 20 years. This suggests that in Italy there is perhaps not yet the degree of awareness of the need to create spaces dedicated to Afro-Italians in order to give them a point of reference, recognition and thus promote their visibility.

The third question was aimed at understanding whether the artists, in the course of their careers, had perceived the Afro-Italian identity as an obstacle to their artistic activity, this also in the light of some sociological discourses made in chapter two on the perception and positionality of black people in Italian society. In fact, all three admit that on some occasions their Afro-Italianness has influenced their path in some way, as in the case of Binta Diaw who on several occasions felt that she was only part of projects to represent blackness, thus creating a distinction within the group. Victor Fotso Nyie felt judged several times for his works that were considered too 'African' or 'tribal', or Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti who, during an art fair, saw his portrait of a black woman withdrawn from the exhibition for no apparent reason. However,

this has never prevented them from finding collaborations and opportunities in which their individuality and artistic talent have been appreciated and recognised.

When asked whether Afro-Italian artists are sufficiently represented in the Italian art system, they all responded, unsurprisingly, that they are definitely less present in institutions than their non-Afro-Italian colleagues. It was therefore interesting to hear from them, who are within the system, some possible suggestions to start a process of greater integration. Each of them gave a different answer, which suggests that action should be taken from different points to improve the situation. On the one hand, institutions should be aware of the diverse artistic production in the country and have the sensitivity to be open to inclusion but in a sincere way, which means doing so not because it is a trend but because it is a necessary action for the good of society. On the other hand, it would be important for the Afro-Italian artists' community to create more networking through dedicated spaces where they can feel recognised.

The last question was meant to be a reflection on the fact that if it is true that Afro-Italian artists do not enjoy the same visibility as white artists in the art system, the problem also reflects on consumers. If the Afro-descendant community does not see itself represented in the cultural environment, it may feel excluded from cultural services and therefore not use them. This aspect once again sheds light on the issue of inclusion in the art system, but from the audience side. The problem does not only concern artists then, but there is also work to be done in terms of audience attendance. The testimonies of the interview suggest that it is more difficult for this community to emerge in the Italian art system, yet it can be seen from the presentation of the artistic production of the three artists that they have always managed to exhibit their works in Italy (all three artists have in fact worked mainly in Italy during their careers), if not in many museum institutions, at least through private galleries, foundations and specific projects. This means that space for Afro-descendant artists in Italy exists, the problem is that it is more marginal and not recognised in the same way as their white colleagues. The representation of Afro-Italian artists seems to be more related to the sensitivities of a few than to a general awareness that this community is well present in Italy and is productive in the artistic field. It is important to give a voice to these artists in order to make them known and to bring them out of their marginalisation and

to be recognised for their talent, so as to start a process of their greater involvement in the system.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse the presence of Afro-Italian visual artists in the Italian art system and in particular in contemporary art institutions. The results of the research led to the conclusion that Afro-Italian artists are poorly represented in contemporary art institutions and in the Italian art scene in general. These results suggest that the decolonisation process of the Italian art system still has a long way to go. This is not surprising since, although the topic of museum decolonisation is central in the international critical debate of recent times, there is not enough attention and awareness about it in the Italian scene.

In spite of the long period of questioning of the museum institution, during which the museum has been redefined as a place that should be the mouthpiece for social demands, it still has obvious difficulties in acknowledging the social need for a more inclusive and conscious representation.

The museum is an institution that decides what to preserve and display and how to communicate the culture, values and thus the identity of a population; it therefore has a function of social control, and it is precisely because of this communicative power of the institutions that it is urgent to intervene in the decolonisation of institutions, as they still communicate through ethnocentric narratives and standardised representational codes, typical of the Western artistic model.

Decolonising the museum means precisely also getting rid of the persistence of these ethnocentric narratives, traces of colonialism that survive in the present not only in the field of art but in many aspects of society. Precisely because art institutions are media of great impact, they represent a valuable and useful space to initiate a process of educating society about colonialism and its legacies in today's social reality. Of course, in order to educate the external sphere, there must first be education and research within the institution aimed at pursuing decolonial practices. Institutions could start with a self-critical analysis of their collections, the way they are displayed, developing a respectful communication that takes into account the ethnic heterogeneity of the public, which also means starting to listen to the problems of the communities that make up the Italian social fabric, trying to support them by representing them and let the space to express themselves autonomously.

If museums started implementing these actions, they would realise that there is a lot of work to be done in terms of inclusion of the Italian Afro-descendant art community. This resistance to the representation of black artists can be traced back to Italy's colonial past, during which an aversion and hatred towards blacks, considered an inferior and uncivilised race and therefore a threat to the integrity of Italians. This attitude towards blacks over the decades has been maintained, certainly transformed, but the revulsion and fear of the different, of the Other, has remained in our society. This results in Afro-descendants finding themselves in a condition of hypervisibility, in that they are immediately differentiated from the “Italians” by a simple physical characteristic, and simultaneously in a condition of invisibility, because from the moment they are perceived as different, they are also marginalised. This marginalisation coincides exactly with the underrepresentation of Afro-Italian artists in the Italian art system. This ghettoization tends to result in them being considered first for their African origin rather than for the quality of their artistic production. This creates prejudices at the outset precisely about the artists' production; according to the Western idea of art produced by Afro-descendants, they tend to deal only with certain issues, such as racism, or to produce visibly African-looking works through almost primitive tribal or spiritual elements. However, as discussed during this thesis, contemporary African and Afro-descendant art production is extremely heterogeneous in terms of artistic styles, techniques and themes. Moreover, this making visible first and foremost the Africanness of Afro-Italian artists necessarily leads to the non-recognition of their Italianness. This dynamic brings us back into the vicious circle of marginalisation of what is considered as other, different, fuelling their exclusion from the Italian art scene. In fact, the results of the research conducted, including the interviews with the three artists, showed that these artists are almost completely absent in contemporary art institutions, except in a few rare cases including the MAXXI museum in Rome or the Museum of Modern Art (MAMbo) in Bologna. Instead, they are more present outside the museum circuit, such as galleries, foundations, private organisations, or specific projects that choose to give space to these artists. However, their visibility remains marginal or the events and exhibitions in which they participate are promoted by organisations run by Afro-descendants, as in the case of Black History Month Florence, an association dedicated exclusively to the promotion of the cultures

of the African diaspora, especially the Italian diaspora founded by an Afro- American artist and curator. The action of associations such as the BHMF is fundamental for Afro-descendant people as they have a place of reference dedicated to them where they can express themselves freely and feel understood, however this is not enough and can even feed this marginalisation to a certain extent by leaving the work of representation only to these organisations. On the other hand, they could be the reference point for those institutions that wish to pursue decolonial practices and want to approach a sincere inclusion of Afro-Italian artists to promote their needed centring in the Italian art system.

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APPENDIX

Interviews with the artists Binta Diaw, Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti and Victor Fotso Nyie. Below the five questions for the three artists and their answers. The interviews were conducted in Italian.

1. Conducendo delle ricerche per la mia tesi ho notato che i musei italiani di arte contemporanea, nonostante i progressi fatti negli anni, non siano ancora molto inclusivi. Che esperienze hai avuto con le istituzioni museali italiane nel corso della tua carriera artistica?
2. Conosci delle realtà italiane (musei, gallerie, associazioni etc.) dedicate unicamente alla rappresentazione di artisti Afro-Italiani?
3. Il fatto di essere un artista Afro-italiano/a in Italia, ha in qualche modo influenzato la tua carriera artistica, impedendoti magari di accedere a qualche opportunità lavorativa?
4. Secondo la tua esperienza personale, ritieni che gli artisti Afro-italiani siano sufficientemente rappresentati nel sistema dell'arte italiano? Se non lo sono, quali pensi siano le soluzioni per rendere il mondo dell'arte italiana più inclusivo?
5. Ritieni che il sistema dell'arte italiano offra dei servizi (mostre, programmi educativi, workshops etc.) rivolti all'intera comunità multietnica italiana o che abbia come punto di riferimento solo un pubblico "bianco"?

Interview with Binta Diaw on 3 May 2022:

1. Innanzitutto, le istituzioni sono in generale dei luoghi difficili a livello di accessibilità. Personalmente, ho avuto la possibilità di lavorare con la Fondazione Sandretto nel 2020 per la mostra *Waves Between Us* e questa è stata la prima volta in cui ho lavorato con una istituzione italiana. In quel caso, il team curatoriale era un team non italiano, quindi, c'era questa tendenza non nuova a cercare artisti che non fossero necessariamente bianchi. Prossimamente a giugno farò parte di una collettiva al Madre di Napoli e quella è una vera istituzione, un museo d'arte Contemporanea, però anche in questo caso la curatrice della mostra è la ex direttrice del Centre Pompidou, Kathryn Weir, che l'ho conosciuta durante un'occasione dove lei era con Ibrahim Mahama, artista ghanese. Ci siamo incontrati abbiamo fatto uno studio visit e lei si è interessata alla mia pratica e mi ha invitato per questa mostra. Anche in questo caso si tratta di un luogo dove c'è un team all'interno già abituato ad un certo tipo di apertura e il fatto che lei non fosse italiana, mi ha aiutato un po' di più perché ha già un approccio differente da quello italiano. Con la Fondazione Sandretto è stato molto bello perché il progetto in sé era molto concreto, aveva un senso. L'istituzione si è presa in carico la produzione, ha avuto grande attenzione nel seguire l'artista dall'inizio alla fine e lo stesso mi sta accadendo per il Madre; quindi, questo per quanto riguarda le istituzioni più grandi. Poi ho lavorato con la mia galleria Giampaolo Abbondio, con la quale ho concluso la mia collaborazione recentemente, che mi ha permesso dopo la prima mostra con loro di ricevere diverse proposte di partecipazione a progetti collettivi come la residenza del BHMf di Justin Randolph Thompson attraverso il quale si sono aperte molte opportunità, tra cui la mostra a Palazzo D'Accursio a Bologna. Ho lavorato anche con il MAD di Firenze in un contesto di mostra collettiva e con il

Goethe Institute. Tutti questi luoghi però sono comunque situazioni non proprio istituzionali, tuttavia, sono delle realtà che hanno un approccio molto più internazionale. Ultimamente ho partecipato anche a tanti progetti però erano sempre comunque un po' per far vedere che c'è la differenza all'interno del gruppo, cioè non era un lavoro contestualizzato che comunque aveva delle ragioni precise per giustificare la mia presenza. L'intento era quello semplicemente di dare un posto a quella nera ed è spesso stato così.

Bisogna dire anche che in Italia non ci sono poi così tante istituzioni e comunque quelle che ci sono mirano più ad artisti con una carriera lanciata alle spalle piuttosto che artisti giovani, e gli artisti come me di seconda generazione, nati da migranti che si sono stabiliti qui in Italia relativamente di recente, sono tutti in una fascia di età giovane quindi l'accessibilità agli spazi istituzionali è anche legata all'età ed essendoci questa tendenza a considerare più gli artisti già affermati, per noi è difficile lavorare.

2. L'unica realtà che conosco sinceramente dedicata alla rappresentazione degli artisti Afro-Italiani è The Recovery Plan di BHMF. Questa realtà è nata proprio in seguito a queste problematiche di rappresentazione con l'intento di creare uno spazio che sopperisse alla mancanza di spazi fisici per gli afro-discendenti. L'impostazione di questa realtà è molto afroamericana (Justin Randolph Thompson è afroamericano), richiama un po' quell'idea che in America, gli afrodiscendenti abbiano lottato e dato la loro vita per costruirsi i loro spazi, quindi, c'è anche questo elemento della comunità e l'idea di creare luoghi di convivialità per minoranze.

Questo spazio è stato fatto per noi adesso ma anche per le prossime generazioni perché ci sia un luogo dove potersi riconoscere e sentirsi bene per quello che si è. A parte The Recovery Plan, non saprei dirti altri luoghi se non ad esempio il PAC (Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea) che secondo me è un'istituzione interessante perché ha aperto uno sguardo a produzioni non necessariamente bianche o Europee e pertanto è stato un buon punto di riferimento per diversi anni ed è anche una realtà che si apre a riflessioni un po' più profonde anche a livello politico, sociale e culturale.

3. Sicuramente sì nel senso che, tante volte non sono stata presa per applications piuttosto che per bandi o progetti, quindi, può essere che anche quello sia stato un motivo. Allo stesso tempo il problema sta alle volte proprio nel come le persone ti percepiscono. Dal momento in cui non sei bianco, ma un artista nero e magari scegli di parlare di determinati argomenti, c'è una tendenza ad etichettare questi artisti che fa sì che poi essi vengano esclusi/e da certi ambienti perché è scomodo o perché non c'è interesse nell' avere un determinato posizionamento anche politico. Diciamo che le nostre figure, come artisti neri, tendono ad essere viste come un'unica cosa ma io ovviamente sono diversa dai miei colleghi afrodiscendenti. Questa omologazione ci penalizza molto perché veniamo visti per come gli altri vogliono vederci e non per quello che siamo veramente. Poi, penso che quando si è donna si aggiungano anche delle complicazioni ulteriori perché c'è anche questa visione stereotipata della donna nera... insomma non è facile. Ora non voglio cadere in retoriche, però il fatto di essere nere e non bianche svolge un ruolo importante.
4. No, non siamo sufficientemente rappresentati intanto perché è una cosa davvero recente, siamo davvero pochissimi artisti essendo che c'è questo fattore generazionale del quale parlavamo prima. Poi quella dell'artista non è mai stata considerata come

una vera e propria professione nel contesto africano ma piuttosto l'arte è sempre stata associata alla figura dell'artigiano, a colui che crea qualcosa che ha una funzionalità e non che è semplicemente decorativo. Già questo ha fatto sì che di per sé ci siano state poche figure afro-discendenti nell'arte poi se si aggiunge il fattore che tanti artisti Afro-Italiani, come me, sono figli e figlie di migranti, sono le seconde generazioni, ci si rende conto che siamo veramente pochi. È difficile trovare persone con un background migratorio che siano artisti visivi, non è una cosa così comune. Di conseguenza no, non siamo rappresentati e le collezioni, ad esempio, tendono ad acquisire opere da artisti anche giovani, però non africani e questa tendenza secondo me è imbarazzante.

È importante dare una spinta e invogliare le persone afrodiscendenti che producono qui in Italia, far sì che abbiano un supporto altrimenti ci sarà sempre questa tendenza a guardare fuori dall'Italia come faccio io. Per me è molto più facile lavorare fuori rispetto che qui in Italia e come me, tanti altri artisti e questo aspetto è molto problematico.

Recentemente ho fatto una mostra in una galleria a Berlino e la direttrice mi ha proposto un'acquisizione per una collezione di un museo pubblico; questa è una cosa che all'estero tendono a fare molto, incoraggiano le persone giovani a farsi conoscere tramite collezioni pubbliche qui in Italia invece è proprio l'opposto. Forse le uniche collezioni interessanti sono quelle dei collezionisti privati però anche in questo caso l'accessibilità è limitata perché se non sei rappresentato da una galleria difficilmente il collezionista viene direttamente da te artista, è molto più facile succeda se il collezionista è legato ad una galleria ovviamente. Guarda, per dire, la mia ultima acquisizione è stata tramite la NTCM studio legale a Roma. Quella è una collezione più aperta rispetto a quella del collezionista privato però diciamo che in generale il collezionismo accessibile a noi è quello privato e non pubblico, sempre se si lavora con una galleria.

Per quanto riguarda le soluzioni che rendano il mondo dell'arte italiana più inclusivo, già il fatto di considerare l'artista nella sua individualità sarebbe un passo in avanti, nel senso di riconoscere il talento, la bellezza di quello che fa nella sua individualità senza generalizzarlo partendo con l'impostazione dell'artista africano nero che parla solo di determinati argomenti. Seconda cosa, bisognerebbe che le istituzioni, per andare a pari passo con la contemporaneità, facessero molta più ricerca nel senso di ridefinizione della struttura del museo, capire la direzione che vogliono prendere e anche fare ricerca sulle ultime pratiche artistiche. E poi si ritorna sulla questione dell'età; in Italia sembra esserci questa impostazione vecchia di considerare l'artista solo quando arriva ad una certa età e questo è sbagliato come approccio. Altre soluzioni sarebbero poi maggiori collaborazioni con persone non italiane, quindi personalità internazionali, curatrici e curatori che non siano sempre e solo bianchi in modo anche da creare un networking, cosa che il nostro paese è un po' restio a fare.

5. Zero lavoro comunità, perché l'arte in Italia è elitaria e si indirizza ad una parte precisa della popolazione. Non è accessibile a tutti se non quella nei musei pubblici storici. L'arte è tutto tranne che comunità in Italia, è poco accessibile per noi artisti, immaginati per le comunità.

Interview with Luigi Christopher Kanku Veggetti on 10 May 2022:

1. La mia esperienza con i musei italiani parte con il MuDEC che comunque è stato uno dei primi musei ad aprirsi sul contemporaneo, a lasciare lo spazio a una nuova narrativa che non fosse solo autoctona. Il MuDEC, che è un museo etnografico e delle culture, è improntato sull'idea di conoscere altre culture e nonostante questo, il museo stesso ammette di aver fatto questo step di avvicinarsi all'inclusione in ritardo.
Per quanto riguarda i musei in generale per me sono ancora molto distanti all'approccio inclusivo perché c'è un problema in realtà legato proprio alla percezione sociale della persona Afro-Italiana e Afro-discendente che poi si riflette nel sistema dell'arte e in tutti i settori ad essi connessi. Essere rappresentati nei musei etnografici e antropologici, che sono diciamo legati alla presentazione delle culture del mondo, può essere in un certo senso un percorso più facile per essere rappresentati nelle istituzioni museali, questo ovviamente parlando per il contesto italiano. Non dico che non ci siano eccezioni però tendenzialmente a meno che non succeda un altro evento che ha avuto risonanza a livello internazionale come la morte di George Floyd, i musei difficilmente si interessano alla rappresentazione degli artisti Afro-Italiani. Con eventi come la morte di Floyd i musei magari si fanno avanti per dimostrarsi inclusivi perché seguono una tendenza che non può essere ignorata in quel momento ma altrimenti l'inclusività nei musei italiani è un meccanismo lento e in ritardo. Poi c'è da dire anche che magari in generale nel contesto del nostro paese, ad un artista del continente africano o ad un Afro-Americano che ha già una certa notorietà e attenzione a livello internazionale viene dato anche lo spazio nei musei del nostro paese ma lo stesso non succede per gli artisti Afro-discendenti italiani.
2. Assolutamente no. Anche la stessa Akka Project è una galleria dedicata ad artisti che provengono però dal continente, io sono un'eccezione diciamo, o almeno sono il primo di un'eccezione. Non conosco ad esempio nessuna galleria nazionale che abbia focus sull'Afro-Italianità. Ma il punto principale qui è una questione di mercato perché il mondo dell'arte è in realtà anche una macchina che produce denaro, ed è anche una grossa macchina, un'industria che funziona principalmente con domanda e offerta; finché non c'è una domanda che giustifichi una presenza di neri o di arte africana nazionale, è difficile trovare artisti afrodiscendenti rappresentati. Ultimamente hanno trovato più spazio nelle gallerie, sempre per la questione di George Floyd e gli eventi ad esso connessi, quindi, è più probabile che una galleria sia interessata a rappresentare un artista di origine africana perché è di tendenza però non so quanto questo duri e quanto l'attenzione su questo rimanga considerando anche la situazione attuale della guerra in Ucraina. Il focus che magari ci poteva essere prima è già sceso e quindi gli artisti iniziano di nuovo a fare più fatica. Anche nelle fiere d'arte, ad esempio, quando ho partecipato io ero uno dei primi artisti Afro-Italiani presenti, l'unico in tutta la fiera. Mi ricordo di quando una volta dovevano esporre un mio ritratto di una donna nera che alla fine è stato tolto dall'esposizione con la scusa che non andava bene nel contesto o non pensavano sarebbero riusciti a venderlo.
3. In realtà posso dirti che in alcune situazioni, anzi la maggior parte delle volte, ho sentito il fatto di essere Afro-Italiano come un valore aggiunto, nel senso che veramente essendo uno dei pochi presenti nel settore, ho percepito la cosa come un valore piuttosto che un elemento negativo. Tuttavia, di contro ti dico anche che c'è, come ti dicevo prima, questa dinamica del mercato dell'arte, quindi ci sono entrambe le situazioni: c'è la parte in cui non c'è mercato quindi per me, ad esempio, che faccio

ritratti di persone nere, e di questi ritratti non c'è richiesta, sostanzialmente non esisto per il mercato italiano, dall'altra parte, il fatto di essere l'unico o comunque uno dei pochi fa sì che io possa essere interessante, una specie di jolly da giocare. Poi è vero anche che capita che una galleria o un ente si giochi questo jolly, ritiene che non funzioni sul mercato e quindi torni a non esistere nuovamente. Tutto poi dipende anche dalla sensibilità della parte che prova ad investire su di te come artista.

4. No, non sono assolutamente rappresentati in modo sufficiente. La presenza Afro-Italiana è sicuramente una minoranza nel paese ma c'è e considerando il numero che siamo, non siamo abbastanza rappresentati. Penso che la soluzione a questo potrebbe essere sicuramente il museo. Se i musei, non solo quelli etnografici ma ovviamente anche quelli di arte contemporanea avessero più coraggio ad iniziare una narrativa più ampia e inclusiva, questo farebbe la differenza perché potrebbero dare il buon esempio a tanti altri enti culturali a seguire queste narrative inclusive.
5. Sostanzialmente penso che il sistema dell'arte italiano abbia come punto di riferimento un pubblico bianco perché rimane ancora quella percezione sociale negativa della persona Afro-discendente e quindi il target è il cittadino bianco anche se ritengo che in alcuni casi le cose stiano migliorando in questo senso. Magari su dieci workshop dedicati a temi legati prettamente ad un pubblico bianco, uno dedicato ad un contesto più globale lo trovi. Purtroppo, però questo è ancora una volta il risultato di quello che è successo con Floyd perché prima di questo evento l'Italia era molto indietro da questo punto di vista. Questo evento ha dato una spinta ad avere la percezione che il mondo non è solo uno e che i punti di vista sono molteplici. Pertanto, siamo ancora lontani da una sincera volontà di inclusività in questo senso però qualche cambiamento, seppur piccolo, è in atto.

Interview with Victor Fotsi Nyie on 18 May 2022:

1. Essendo un artista emergente, penso che la mia carriera sia stata avviata da pochi anni per darti una risposta concreta e maturata. Penso però che i musei e le istituzioni siano alimentati da un circuito di base come gallerie d'arte, associazioni culturali, progetti curatoriali, fiere etc. che in qualche modo contribuiscono a dare visibilità all'artista, creando condizioni idonee ad attrarre le istituzioni.
Detto ciò, il mondo dell'arte è in grande parte capitalistico; i musei e tante istituzioni talvolta sono finanziati dalle banche che a loro volta promuovono progetti di un certo tipo nei quali loro e il loro pubblico si identificano.
Detto questo sarebbe disonesto da parte mia negare lo sforzo che stanno facendo alcune istituzioni per promuovere e includere artisti stranieri in Italia, anche se in piccola scala. Io stesso ne ho usufruito qualche volta.
2. L'unico progetto che conosco in Italia interamente dedicato alla ricerca di artisti Afro-italiani è il Black History Month Florence che al suo interno comprende programmi di residenza d'artista, mostre collettive e personali, conferenze e tutte quelle attività che celebrano la black culture. È presente in varie città d'Italia.
È un progetto ben articolato che oggi fa da piedistallo per noi artisti Afro-italiani, creando dei ponti tra noi e le istituzioni.

3. Senz'altro direi che il contesto storico e sociologico italiano abbia influenzato la mia ricerca sin dai miei primi anni in accademia dove i programmi di studio erano a maggioranza eurocentrici.
Tante volte mi sono sentito giudicato per le mie origini, per il mio lavoro troppo "Africano" e talvolta "tribale". Tuttavia, questi giudizi hanno rafforzato in me il legame con l'Africa.
Purtroppo, essere nero in Italia oggi è ancora vissuto come un limite, la storia continua a vivere nel presente.
Per fortuna in qualche modo l'arte trionfa sempre.
4. Lo stesso sistema è fatto in modo che la scrematura avvenga dal basso dove tanti mollano la presa già dopo ripetute difficoltà di ogni tipo per cui pochi arrivano ad intraprendere una solida carriera. Inoltre, la mancanza di modelli in cui identificarsi contribuisce al disorientamento.
In Italia gli artisti Afro-italiani sono poco rappresentati e meno presenti nelle istituzioni, nonostante l'ipocrito fenomeno nato nel 2020 dal Black Lives Matter attraverso il quale tante istituzioni, per pulirsi la faccia, abbiano inserito artisti Afro-discendenti nelle loro programmazioni ma in modo non veramente inclusivo.
Per risolvere questo problema, gli artisti Afro-discendenti si devono mettere insieme non per parlare con una sola voce perché l'arte è anche differenza e diversità bensì per farsi forza, per costruire un sistema parallelo solido che si auto alimenti, che faccia concorrenza e che si faccia rispettare, non aiutare.
5. Come ho detto prima, il sistema dell'arte come ogni altro sistema dovrebbe iniziare ad essere interattivo (multilaterale) e non integrativo (a senso unico dove "l'altro" deve fare di tutto per farsi accettare) dove la nozione universalismo non è altro che una visione eurocentrica del mondo, per cui al nome di "l'arte è universale" ogni programmazione sarebbe inclusiva cioè rivolta a tutti.
Chiuse le parentesi in cui a momenti alcuni gruppi minoritari sono messi in luce in modo ipocrito (prendendo l'esempio degli ucraini che oggi fanno notizia e tutti i riflettori gli sono puntati addosso) tante iniziative ed opportunità sono progettati per un pubblico a maggioranza "bianca".