

## Dislocation and Materiality



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Cover image: Mary Crenshaw (2017) *New to the City*, oil, on canvas, 110cm x 100cm.

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## **Abstract**

*Dislocation, and Materiality* is the culmination my three years of research into artists and theorists, whose work provided me with a clearer direction in my practice as a painter. My research has enabled me to become more aware of the reasons for my current approach to painting that includes: relying on my physical energy, the inherent properties in the material/paint, defining space, memory of place that suggests urban landscape and its inhabitants.

The theories of Georges Bataille on the mark, François Jullien on the Chinese concept of life-force, and Theodor Adorno on how dissonance is central to artistic and aesthetic process have fed the development of my creative practice. The key artists I researched –Anselm Kiefer, Julie Mehretu, Fabienne Verdier, Mark Bradford, and Phyllida Barlow – provided me with new concepts to introduce in my own work. Mehretu's paintings supplied me with the solution for incorporating political content by means of suggestive titles and expressive marking over imagery. Kiefer's rich assortment of media led me to understand how materials contribute to the meaning of a work. Verdier's gesture and physical energy encouraged me to let go of control and embrace expressionistic paint application. How Mark Bradford uses found brochures and posters from his neighbourhood, transforming them into material for his work gave me the insight that meaning can be in the actual materials. Phyllida Barlow's dynamic works made me consider how the different kinds of marks I create carry vitality and ideas communicated by the material properties of the paint.



## **Introduction**

This report includes the work I have completed over the past three years during my Professional Doctorate research, the creative and professional development of my painting practice, and the artists I have investigated. My own experiences as an American living in Italy and studying in the UK fuelled the need to examine issues of exclusion and denied access. Aligned with this, through my daily encounters with displaced people, I started to question the migrant situation in Italy and now this has impacted on my practice.

Research into writer Petra Lange-Berndt, philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and François Jullien, and critics Rosalind Krauss and Linda Nochlin has changed the way I reflect upon my work. Theoretical reading has shaped my interests and made me more acutely aware of how the techniques I use to make my paintings can establish meaning.

I studied in-depth artists Mark Bradford, Robert Rauschenberg, Anselm Kiefer, Julie Mehretu, Fabienne Verdier, Lee Krasner, and Phyllida Barlow. Bradford's collaged advertisements, Rauschenberg's paint-drenched newspaper, and Kiefer's clay covered photographs are abstract works that powerfully evoke. Mehretu's method of tracing architectural imagery, then covering it with gestural marks influenced my use of layering paint over figures that I initially draw on the canvas. Verdier's large gestural paintings inspired me to simplify and work larger. Krasner's collaged canvases and drawings gave me input about how I can cut my paintings as a means of improving them compositionally. Barlow's pushing her work and having ungraceful results has helped me come to terms with accepting immediacy and not attempting to hide clumsiness that is the outcome of my process.

I began sketching from memory the migrants I saw on Milan street corners, their outstretched arms holding baseball caps while begging for spare change. The circular shape of the caps seemed to suggest emptiness and want and echoed the shape of begging bowls or bringing to mind sayings such as 'cap in hand' that denoted a plan for help due to hardship.

At the beginning of the Professional Doctorate Programme, because it was necessary to travel from Milan to attend seminars and study at the University of East London, scale was an issue.

I tried to find various ways my paintings could be travel-size, as pragmatic and economic solutions to transporting them back and forth. After critiques with fellow students, supervisors, and seminar leaders, I realized that working small hindered my gestural way of painting, so I started to work larger and changed from paper support to unstretched canvas. Doing this has enabled me to travel with the work, and as a consequence of the large scale, my paintings have become less restrained. I choose to present the finished work without stretchers, which is emblematic of their transportability, and of my growing interest in investigations around dislocation and displacement.

In current work I rely on my physical energy to apply the marks, as well as the paint's natural ability to define space. These characteristics, together with suggestions of the figure and details of the urban landscape are features that unite my abstractions as a group. Since I am working larger now and because of the layering and necessity of allowing the paint to dry between layers, the increased scale of my work has forced me to become more contemplative.

Close to the end of my second year of the Professional Doctorate, after having failure after failure during weeks of painting, with only days left before my paintings needed to be dry enough to take to London for the 2017 *Showcase* exhibition, I made most of the five paintings I went on to exhibit there. The seminar leader insisted that the failed paintings had been necessary to lay the ground for the quicker, more successful work.

While researching Fabienne Verdier, I discovered that she routinely destroys her unsuccessful work. I have been doing this too, by cutting up my canvases, similarly to how Lee Krasner cut her drawings as a way of transforming them. When revisiting my largest paintings, I edit them through cutting as a way of saving areas that function compositionally and using them. This way of modifying my work has liberated me from over-thinking, imposing too much control over the paint and over-working. Through abstracting elements of the human form, architecture, and urban landscape I have discovered a way of questioning social and political inequality.

## Personal and Creative Context

Growing up surrounded by my mother's colourful paintings from when she was a Ringling College of Art student, drew me to bold colours in my own painting when I began my BA at Virginia Commonwealth University. Because of this, professors encouraged me to look at work by Red Grooms and Jim Nutt, Chicago artists whose examples led me to paint a series of stage scenes adapted from photographs discovered in books about Hollywood and Vaudeville. As students, in addition to studio time, we were required to visit gallery and museum exhibitions in Richmond, Washington, DC, and Manhattan, where SOHO and East Village galleries had the cutting-edge work.

We were encouraged to read extensively about art, although there was no required essay or thesis. Calvin Tompkins' *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Guard* was significant to me because he discussed Duchamp's influence on the following generation of younger artists. This gave me insight into how looking at artists from past generations could be incremental to the development of one's own work.

Visiting artists at VCU included: Laurie Anderson, Lucas Samaris, William Wegman, Nancy Rubins, and Pat Oleszko. Samaris' different approaches to his work, such as manipulating polaroid photographs, painting, and sewing intrigued me. Because of the graphic positioning of patterned fabric he incorporated in his paintings, I was inspired to explore Samaris' repetition of shapes and colours in my work, which led me directly to the Pattern and Decoration Movement.

According to Holland Cotter (2008), Pattern and Decoration began during the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of the feminist art movement and was a reaction against minimalist art. Many Pattern and Decoration artists combined paint with decorative elements, such as sewing and beading, to execute spatially flat compositions. In one painting series I used glitter and glue, marking the beginning of my experimentation with various materials added to the paint. I also spent lots of time in the etching studio. My major was Painting and Printmaking and the etching process facilitated experimental mark making. I cut the metal plates into templates, arranging the pieces and printed them on one sheet of paper, as if collaging.



Fig.1 Mary Crenshaw *Ancestral Worship* acrylic on canvas 150 x 150 cm. 1977

My painting *Ancestral Worship* was selected for exhibition at VCU's Anderson gallery and given a merit award by Walter Hopps, then head of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It made me feel like I had chosen the right path when Hopps mentioned my painting's bold colours and composition in his talk.

Remaining in Richmond some years after graduating, I participated in exhibitions in the artist cooperative 1708, and was a member of The Women's Caucus for Art. For fifteen dollars a month I rented a spacious studio in the crumbling, 'spooky' former Masonic Temple building. First I made a living as a playground art instructor for the Department of Parks and Recreation; later as a hairdresser. Hairdressing required manual and social abilities, a good balance with the isolation needed to be a painter. My boss— a flamboyant, pioneer, trans-

woman –let me use a corner of the salon for painting after the Masonic Temple was sold to city developers and the artists were evicted. I began to collage hair in small works on paper and made large paintings on canvas of bouffant hairstyles based on drawings from hair-magazine photographs.

An artist who worked at the Virginia Museum told a curator about my work on paper with collaged snippets of hair. This body of work was included in a four-person exhibition at the now defunct Institute of Contemporary Art, a portion of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts that was dedicated to contemporary art. By then, most of my friends from art school had transferred to New York, which is where I thought I would end up. However, I opted to move to Paris because I was told it was easy to find work there. I worked as an au pair in exchange for rent and I found work as American artist Jennifer Bartlett's studio assistant from 1984 to 1986.

Prominent artists, filmmakers, writers, actors, and art world people frequented Bartlett's studio. However, it was experiencing up-close the dedication and solid work ethic of such an established artist that proved invaluable. The family I au paired for let me use a room in their flat as a studio where I experimented with making paint from powdered pigments and drew using ink and coloured pencils. Subject matter was from my experiences in Paris, such as scenes in restaurants or in the nearby Luxembourg Gardens of people strolling, sunbathing, reading, or feeding the pigeons. As a young woman I responded to the excitement of my new environment; I painted what I wanted to see.



Fig. 2. Mary Crenshaw *Igneous Conglomerate* oil, sand on canvas 150 x 180 cm. 2012

I enrolled at L'Alliance Française and it was there that I met my husband, Lucio. When his job changed and Jennifer asked me to come with her to New York to au pair her soon to be born daughter, we decided to move to Milan. For the last thirty years I have resided in Italy. I taught English as a second language and stayed at home to raise our two sons. Observing the uninhibited way they splashed paint on paper and the interesting results started to infiltrate my painting and inspired me to explore abstraction. I had also recently seen a retrospective at the Palazzo Reale in Milan of the American abstract expressionist William Congdon who lived in Italy, and was inspired by his paintings. Later, I developed friendships with artists and became affiliated with a commercial gallery so that I could explore making a living as a contemporary artist.

A few years ago, I felt it was time for a change. My painting was stagnating and I needed a larger community of artists to discuss work with. Through a friend, I discovered a programme in Boston, Massachusetts at Lesley University. In Lesley's low residency Master of Fine Art programme I was able to study and still live in Milan, going to Boston twice a year for seminars.

At Lesley the Critical Theory electives helped me to gain confidence in discussions about my work. In Critical Theory I, we learned how meaning is created through convention, and that visual and non-visual language is an arbitrary social construct. I could relate to this, having lived in between two different cultures and noting the contrasting contemporary art trends that took place mainly before Internet. In Italy the majority of artists were concerned more with design elements in their work, more than the content. The really exciting work was occurring elsewhere, where Italian artists played it safe. This is no longer entirely true because of improvement in communication.

Later, we read Claes Oldenberg's manifesto, *I am for an Art*, in which Oldenberg described a world full of images, sensations, and experiences (Stiles and Selz, p. 335). His belief that inspiration could be derived from one's immediate environment rang true. Oldenberg's declaration encouraged me to explore more meaningful approaches to my practice and to observe my surroundings for input.

In Critical Theory III we read *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* by Southern-born African American bell hooks, who described how standing up for her viewpoint strengthened and protected her from racial and female prejudice (1989). Also coming from a stifling, conservative, and Southern United States background, I related to hooks' need to voice her thoughts and opinions. For hooks, knowledge equals confidence, and for me developing a discourse around my work through knowledge was invaluable.

Through the first group critiques, I discovered the need to make more complex work by exploring different subject matter. By walking around Milan and taking photographs, I began observing the city and located a wealth of imagery I was drawn to and could use in my work. Also, painting Professor Anthony Apesos insisted that only five colours are needed for a complete palette: lamp black, flake white, Venetian red, yellow ochre, and ultramarine blue. I liked this idea, so I began using only those colours in my paintings.

At the Boston Museum of Fine Arts I saw a compelling exhibition that coupled paintings by ten contemporary Chinese painters with ancient Chinese ink paintings from the museum's

permanent collection. The calligraphic brush strokes interested me because the range of expressive quality obtained in the paint's application and I decided mark making would be a main concern in my work. I began to explore work by Joan Mitchell, Ivon Hitchens, Cecily Brown, Frank Auerbach, Charline Von Heyl, Zao Wou KI, and Philip Guston. Joan Mitchell's use of colour as composition was my first essay topic. I learned that colour and paint density can create compositional space the same way as forms and shapes. After that, I analyzed two Philip Guston paintings from 1961, *Close Up III* and *Duo*. These bold, primitive paintings felt subversive in their clumsiness. Painting wet into wet, Guston created three - dimensional illusion within his marks, a technique that I began to test in my work.



Fig. 3 Mary Crenshaw *Steamed* oil on canvas 150 x 100 cm. 2012.



*Ai Wei Wei's Blog*, and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Interviews Volume 2* were two engrossing required readings. I had just seen Ai Wei Wei's *Sunflower Seeds* at the Turbine Hall, so it was thought- provoking to read this socially engaged artist's blog posts. His blog was an open forum that described his artistic activities and those of other political-activist Chinese artists, until the government shut it. Obrist's *Interviews Volume 2* introduced me to French Sinologist François Julien, who spoke of the importance of physical energy in Chinese culture (p. 564). Julien's explanation of why calligraphy is highly valued in China motivated me to learn more about this French philosopher who elucidates the division between Western notions of force versus Eastern notions of energy and flexibility. In the West value is given to strength and will, with youth being considered desirable. However, in Eastern cultures energy of the life force is immensely valued, which is why the elderly are highly respected.



Fig. 4. Mary Crenshaw *Corpulent* oil, graphite on canvas, 50 x 30 cm. 2012.

The following semester I graduated and participated in the final joint exhibition. I presented two large oil on canvas paintings and three smaller ones, all five on stretchers. During the next summer in 2013, after spending two weeks in my husband's hometown, I created a body of paintings entitled *Southern Stories*. This work alludes to the precariousness of day to day living in Southern Italy, a region that incubates organized crime, crooked politicians, and poverty. In February 2014 *Southern Stories* was included in *Thirst*, a four-person joint exhibition curated by George Mogg at Brunel University. The University acquired four of my pieces from the exhibition for its permanent collection. I continued to work on Canson paper for oil, developing larger paintings on multiple sheets of paper. This good fortune gave me the self-confidence to apply to the UEL Professional Doctorate programme.



Fig.5. Mary Crenshaw *Southern Stories III*, oil, spray enamel on paper 70 x 50 cm. 2013.

In December 2013, I attended my first residency at the Art Students League at Vyt in Sparkill, New York. Where, for the entire month, I painted daily, participated in critiques with visiting artists, and conversed with fellow resident artists. At first, I began making paintings of the verdant upstate New York landscape, until I had a critique with Swiss artist Hans Witschi, who noticed a small work where I had hurriedly smeared on grey and brown paint with a piece of cardboard. He said that was the real me. So, I returned to gesture and my usual subdued palette, creating the *Blue Sky of New York* series of oil on paper, where I abandoned the brush and layered the paint using painting knives.

In January 2015, I was a resident artist at the Vermont Studio Centre. This time I requested the print studio where I made numerous monotypes. Master printmaker Sarah Amos taught me how to make multi-plate collagraphs. Combining and turning the plates, I could always come up with a different print. Since I discovered in Vermont that monotype suits my quick, gestural way of working, I decided to take advantage of the excellent printmaking facilities at UEL.

After my first year at UEL, I participated in a residency at Centre D' Art Marnay, north of Paris, where I concentrated on creating work for *Stanze* and for my second year of the UEL Professional Doctorate. I used this residency time as an opportunity to test new ideas. After seeing Saul Leiter's work at the Photography Gallery in London, I was intrigued by how he had painted a number of his photographs. Lieter's striking images/figures in the painted photographs moved in and out of focus, giving a glimpse of the seen or unseen, simultaneously recognizable and hidden. This led me to paint found photographs as a residency project. I also made graphite and charcoal rubbings from the Marnay cemetery tombstones, incorporating text with drawing. Painting the photographs led to the appearance of figures in my paintings a few months later.

## **Creative Practice and Theory**

Anselm Kiefer, Fabienne Verdier, and Julie Mehretu are three artists whose work I chose to investigate because of their distinct visual vocabularies and the affinities of their work with my own concerns. Mehretu looks at world events and synthesizes them into marks that according to her (Tate, 2016) evoke "time, place, and space". Verdier uses bodily energy to guide a weighty calligraphy brush she designed that hangs vertically from her studio ceiling and this energy is transmitted onto her canvases. According to Lasser, 'Her brushstroke speaks of the now and acts as a permanent testament to the fleeting and evanescent moment' (Verdier, 2017, p.33). Kiefer is constantly renewing and evolving his work through paint and materials such as lead, plaster, seeds and clay. 'By the introduction of natural materials and real objects in his work, for example, Kiefer was deliberately turning his back on illusionism of classical painting' (Arasse, 2014, p.307).

The theoretical concerns of Georges Bataille, Kasimir Malevich, Rosalind Krauss, François Jullien, Theodor W. Adorno, and the feminist ideology of Audre Lorde are relevant to aspects of Mehretu, Verdier, and Kiefer's art and are touched on throughout this report. I consider how the ideas of these theorists have fed my imagination and my practice, and helped me gain insight into what it is I want to achieve with my practice.

## Anselm Kiefer

[Fig.6 Anselm Kiefer *Untitled (Constellation Book)* mixed media on lead, 100 x 30 cm, 2004]

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Anselm Kiefer was born in post-war Germany in 1945. Foster et al (2004, p.597) states that when Kiefer came to the forefront of the art world during the 1980s, many different stylistic trends were occurring simultaneously that broke with the previous generation of minimalist and conceptual artists. In 1980, Kiefer gained sudden notoriety when he represented Germany in the Venice Biennial. In a group of photographic self-portraits from a road trip staged in various European countries, the artist performed the Nazi salute and declared, "I occupied Switzerland, France, and Italy" (Arasse 2001, p. 69). Until that time in Germany, representation of the Second World War had been taboo and these images caused outrage and resentment and stirred up criticism (Arasse, 2001, p.22). Since then, Kiefer has looked to war-torn Germany as subject matter for his colossal paintings, sculptures, portraits, artist books and installations. His work has a universal and contemporary relevance in a time when war, violence, and catastrophe are ever-present realities.

Kiefer's incorporation of substances in his paintings like lead, cement, mud, oil, varnish, acrylic, seeds, and straw brings to mind Bataille's theory of the creative and destructive characteristics of mark-making. Smearing mud over photographs, scorching his canvases, and drenching them with molten lead are acts of defacement, evoking the formless, rotten, or scatological. Bataille's notion of the mark as 'defacing'—both a spiritual and obscene gesture—links it to innate contradictions in human nature (Krauss, 1999, p.5). We make scientific and artistic discoveries, help other human beings, create cities and cure diseases, yet we also wage war, commit homicide and genocide, and all manner of atrocities. Creation and destruction are characteristics of our world and our selves as a species.

As an example, Bataille describes in detail the human relationship to mark as early as 1929 in the magazine *Documents* (Krauss, 1999, p.5).

Bataille's word for this logic of primitivism was alteration, by which he meant both decomposition (as in corpses) and the total otherness of the sacred (as in ghosts). That the word alteration could thus, like the Latin *altus*, have the internally contradictory double meaning of both "high" or sacred and "low" or rotten is evidence once more of *formlessness* doing its job. And the alteration that Bataille saw in the caves, even while the painters promoted the detailed depiction of animal life, was a lowering or debasing of the representation of the specifically *human* form. But striking at the human body in an act of self-mutilation was what Bataille considered the primal fact of marking, not the creation of form but the defacement of it in a gesture that was simultaneously sacred and scatological (1999, p.8).

[Fig.7 Anselm Kiefer *Lot's Wife*, Acrylic, emulsion, and ashes on canvas with salt and lead, 1000 x1200 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art 1990]

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[Fig.8 Anselm Kiefer, *The History of German Salvation*, Oil, emulsion, shellac and sediment of electrolysis on canvas, 378 cm x 1099 cm. Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2012-2013].

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In Milan's Hangar Bicocca exhibition space there is a permanent site-specific Kiefer installation, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*. This immense work resembling a post-apocalyptic world is composed of massive sixty-foot ninety-ton concrete structures with details alluding to ancient Hebrew writings (Cane, 2015). Recently, five new paintings by Kiefer were added to the installation. One, *The History of German Salvation* reveals the artist's philosophical and theoretical concerns. An obvious tribute to Caspar David Friedrich, associated with Romanticism and the Sublime a man is depicted facing a body of water. Above him Kiefer painted a rainbow with a list of names of German philosophers, Immanuel Kant being the first name on the bottom left.

[Fig. 9 Anselm Kiefer *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, partial view, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan 2004-2015].

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In his classic work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant gives theoretical weight to ideas of the beautiful and the sublime. He begins this inquiry 'not as a philosopher', but as an onlooker, as a way of comprehending the reasons that certain characteristics of things and other people repel and attract us (Kant, 2011, p16). Beauty is perceived in daylight, youth, small stature, and small objects; the sublime is encountered in night, solitude, large buildings, tall and old people. Kant states, 'the sublime touches, the beautiful charms'; the sublime evokes feelings of 'dread or melancholy', whereas beauty brings to mind cheerfulness (2011, p.16).

My copy of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* has on its cover the Kasper David Friedrich painting appropriated by Kiefer in *The History of German Salvation*. With this as evidence, I could assume that Kiefer aspires for his work the Kantian sublime. It is no accident that the entire huge installation of *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* is draped in heavy velvet-like black fabric to simulate night or the enormous scale of the sculptures and paintings and the desolate, post-apocalyptic feel of the installation.

Kiefer's 2016 exhibition at the White Cube in London titled *Walhalla*, refers to 'the mythical place in Norse mythology, a paradise for those slain in battle, as well as to the Walhalla neo-classical monument, built by Ludwig I King of Bavaria in 1842 to honour heroic figures in German history' (*Anselm Kiefer Bermondsey 2016/White Cube*. <http://www.whitecube.com>, 2016). Impressive in its breadth and scale and its intriguing materials, the exhibition filled the gallery's huge central space and many rooms with enormous installations and paintings.

Handwriting on the lead bed sculptures, gouges in the oil paintings, splashed paint and molten lead call to mind war, death, and desolation. What most interested me were Kiefer's weighty, red clay artist books, with printed architectural imagery embedded and partially hidden in the clay. Making books from clay gives them a primitive, organic quality, suggesting an archaeological find, a more physical kind of book, or a future where books will no longer be of use. The books were displayed on table-like structures of welded steel. The parallel lines gouged into the steel are characteristic marks in Kiefer's paintings; in this work they seem like lines of unreadable written text.

[Fig. 10 Anselm Kiefer, *Splitting I and II*, (1986) Two-volume book of clay, photographs, synthetic polymer paint, glass, porcelain, and copper wire on board, bound with canvas, each on a steel lectern designed by the artist .Volume I 70.4 cm x 50.2 cm x 12.2 cm, volume II 71 cm x 50.8 cm x 8.9 cm. lecterns, each 104 cm x 110.1 cm x 67.2 cm. Moma, New York].

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Soon after seeing *Walhalla*, I went to the Tate Modern exhibition *Rauschenberg*. I perceived many connections between Kiefer's and Rauschenberg's work including their use of a wide range of materials, their experimentation, and their interest in political protest. A prime example of Rauschenberg's investigation of mediums was *Untitled*, an early work from 1952 where he drenched crumpled newspaper in black enamel paint and applied the pages uniformly to a large canvas. As a student at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s, Rauschenberg made an entire black painting series, including one with areas of revealed newspaper (Joseph, 2002, p.76). Rauschenberg's strategy of covering and uncovering resembles the way Kiefer leaves the large photographs partially exposed in the clay books.



[Fig. 11 Robert Rauschenberg, *untitled black painting on canvas*, Rauschenberg Foundation, 1952].

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[Fig. 12 Robert Rauschenberg *untitled black painting on paper*, Enamel on newspaper, Rauschenberg Foundation, 1952].

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Rauschenberg's breakthrough occurred when he allowed the newspaper to be visible. Helen Molesworth writes, 'Its disposability ensures its dailiness, repetition, and regularity' (Joseph, 2002, p. 76). Because the newspaper was left uncovered, text and photographic images added meaning that the previous paint-covered works lacked. It is my observation that for the young Rauschenberg, this particular piece represented a step forward in his work. Molesworth suggests that Rauschenberg's black painting series possesses a fecal quality, because of colour, texture and the implication that we ingest newspapers (Joseph, 2002, p. 78). She describes how these paintings provide 'intense visual pleasure' together with 'uneasiness and disgust' and their relationship to 'the body and the anxieties, fantasies, and problems it raises (arouses)' (Joseph, 2002, p.78).

## Fabienne Verdier

[Fig. 13 Fabienne Verdier, *Fresque Torlonia, Opus I*, Ink pigments and varnish on canvas, 407 cm x 763cm. 2010, Palazzo Torlonia, Rome].

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The French artist Fabienne Verdier makes gestural paintings, frequently creating large installations on multiple panels. In the early 1980s Verdier relocated to China where she lived for ten years and apprenticed with a Master Calligrapher. During her time in China, she absorbed and assimilated its culture, which explains why Eastern Philosophy permeates her work. Abadie describes how Verdier has fashioned an unusual calligraphy brush that is suspended from the studio ceiling. Made from thirty-five horsetails, the mammoth brush has a pair of bicycle handlebars attached midway up the handle (2014, p.8). Verdier defines space with gestural explosions of ink—sometimes only one continuous mark—applied by her huge mechanical brush to a canvas placed horizontally on the floor.

Philosopher and Sinologist François Jullien informs curator Hans Ulrich Obrist that in Chinese culture there is no concept of soul, but that of a vital, distinctive life-force (2010, p.564). Jullien describes how instead of the Western concept of suffering and endurance, Eastern convictions include aspiration of flexibility and awareness (2010, p. 574). Jullien's comparison of Eastern pliability to Western rigidity sheds more light on Verdier's concerns. Daniel Abadie believes Verdier's gestural paintings relate to American Abstract Expressionism and in particular the paintings of Willem de Kooning (2014, p.8)

[Fig. 14 Willem de Kooning, *Litho #2 (Waves #2)*, lithograph, 45 7/8 inches x 31 3/4 inches, 1960, The Museum of Modern Art, New York].

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According to John O'Brian, in a 1957 review of an exhibition at the Poindexter gallery in New York, Greenberg wrote, 'de Kooning -an artist who had nothing more to learn from anyone:

the first on the American scene to open a really broad and major vein for himself inside Late Cubism' (1993, p.23). Verdier has opened up the discourse of contemporary abstract painting, synthesizing Asian calligraphy with abstract expressionism, thus developing a highly personal form of painting.

Doris von Drathen describes Fabienne Verdier's philosophy as including the belief that 'the human body is a tool bonding heaven and earth' (2012 p.9). Indeed, on Verdier's website (Verdier, 2016) there is a video of the artist in ink-stained, gloved hands clutching the handlebars of her giant calligraphy brush, guiding it across a precise grid of rectangular canvases placed on the floor. Obviously, she needs strength to push the ink-laden brush by the way her body is firmly planted, leaning, knees bent, and pushing with her legs. The video is reminiscent of the famous 1951 Hans Namuth film of Jackson Pollock painting.

Twenty years ago Amelia Jones proclaimed that, 'The Pollockian performative has re-emerged'...' to become a central impetus for practices returning to the politics and phenomenology of the body' (1998, p.99). Performance is yet another aspect of Verdier's art, her brush being an essential prop.

Another idea relevant to Verdier's work is 'indexicality'. Rosalind Krauss writes: ' By index I mean the type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples' (1986, p.211). The indexical sign produces a physical connection to meaning that is ambiguous. In *The Walking Paintings*, Verdier guiding her loaded brush while walking on top of the paper captures physical traces of her movement that evoke time, motion, and landscape. These works are simple and direct yet sophisticated and poetic in their use of indexical signs of the body and its actions.

[Fig. 15 Fabienne Verdier, *From the Walking Paintings Series, Solo no°5*, Ink on paper, 199 cm x 135 cm 2013]

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In her artistic practice Fabienne Verdier extols the body's energy as a sacred tool. In 2014 being the first resident artist at the Julliard School of Music in New York, she experimented with the simultaneous creation of painting and music. Philip Lasser explains, 'Harmony in music and painting allows time and space to become one thing, not separate elements'. Where before Verdier was interested in line, her focus shifted because of this collaborative project (De Staël, A, Crichton-Miller, E., Lasser, P., 2016, p. 33, p.34). The paintings produced during her residency are complex, with denser marks and paint application. This is an interesting development since previously she claimed her body was a link between the earth and sky; now it is an antenna for the vibrations of sounds.

Verdier's latest rapport with music brings to mind another former Black Mountain College student: John Cage. Helen Molesworth writes how Cage addressed the body, music, and sound in one of his most famous works, *Silent Piece*. While closed in a soundproof room at Harvard University, Cage heard two tones. " When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds" (Joseph, B.W., 2002, p.79). Ray Kass brings to light how Cage's fascination with painting and printmaking were ignited by his devotion to Eastern Philosophy, the desire to use chance, and an interest in 'eliminating personal expression in pursuit of a purely aesthetic experience' (2012, p.7).

[ Fig. 16 John Cage, *Holding the biggest (84-inch wide) brush*, 1990].

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[Fig. 17 Fabienne Verdier, *Instability I*, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 226 cm x 150 cm, Waddington Custot. 2016].

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Similar to Cage's approach, Verdier's desire to use chance is seen in *Instability I*, where there is a flurry of vigorous, black brushstrokes together with small flicks and drips from the long bristles of the artist's calligraphy brush set against a tan background. While mesmerising lines of the wide, gestural motions draw the viewer in, the numerous vertical drips from the thick paint are resting places for the eye. A horizontal, black wood-strip joins the diptych in the middle. The neat black line evokes landscape and at the same time alters the perception of space. This horizontal line echoes the vertical drip-lines and disintegrates the organic, curvilinear space.

In *Instability I* dissonant drips and splashes veer off from Verdier's main horizontal brush strokes. As stated by Robert W. Witkin, Theodor Adorno elaborated ideas of dissonance in art and music: 'The world—and the experience of the subject in the world—is not reconciled but rooted in antagonistic relations' (1998, p. 52). Existence in our world is difficult, where exploitation and oppression contribute to these hostile interactions. The dissonance of Verdier's erratic marking results in an exciting and vital painting. I have found Adorno's concept of dissonance in art and music to be useful and exciting. Dissonance is central to aesthetic and artistic process, as well as being relevant to the social and political world. Social dissonance plays a more direct part in the work of Julie Mehretu.

Julie Mehretu

[Fig.18 Julie Mehretu, *Transcending-The New International*. 271 cm x 602 cm, Ink, acrylic on canvas 2003].

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Julie Mehretu has been at the forefront of contemporary abstract painting for over fifteen years. Mehretu creates her large-scale paintings by projecting and tracing architectural renderings onto the canvas, spraying a coating of acrylic emulsion, sanding this skin, then painting another layer of abstract marks with sumi brushes and ink (Tomkins, 2010, p. 62). Her multi-strata canvases allude to world events such as war, political turbulence, the Olympics, and migration.

Barry Schwabsky notes that some of her marks concern periods in history and emulate Russian Suprematist symbols (2002, p. 214). The founder of Russian Suprematism Kazimir Malevich believed that abstraction enabled authentic artistic development, while representation was only sheer imitation. Evgenja Petrova describes how Malevich believed that through artistic abstraction the physical world gave way to profound visionary ideas of existence (1990, p.106). Mehretu uses gesture and line as reference to past and present civilizations and through this has discovered a way of using architectural drawings and other forms of representational imagery as a basis for abstraction. Mehretu's Russian Suprematist symbol-traces are the artist's nod to Malevich and abstraction, and she layers marks over architectural imagery, repeating until a more abstract pattern appears. Through this painting technique, she can include and suggest "political and social thought" (Umish.edu, 2009).

In fact, Mehretu's architectural renderings in *Transcending-The New International* were adapted from pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. These images were layered with charts of Africa's financial and governmental investments (Umish.edu, 2009). Her underlying theme examines various kinds of social mutation and a flawed, idealistic yearning for a better and just society (Umish.edu, 2009). As a woman of African descent, Julie Mehretu plays with elements of personal identity through this historical and contemporary imagery. Mehretu's gestural, energetic, and visually absorbing paintings interest me because of the way she folds subject matter into her abstractions.

African American poet and feminist Audre Lorde writes, 'Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad/up/down, superior/inferior'. Describing the oppressed individuals as being 'women, Blacks, the old, manual and industrial labourers, and refugees', Lorde discerns that society makes them feel like second-class citizens (2004, p.855).

Mehretu confronts the historical issues of prejudice in her paintings and underlines what has happened in the past to groups of oppressed peoples. Calvin Tomkins tells that, 'From the age of seven Mehretu has seen herself as a negotiator between cultures and expectations' (2010, p.65). For most of her life Mehretu has straddled two very different cultures—Ethiopia and the United States. This has given her a lived experience of clashing social and political worlds, a dissonance which enriches her paintings and gives them their underlying strength.

In some of her paintings Mehretu uses removal as part of her process, believing that eradicating parts of a painting leads to creation of something new (Umich.edu, 2009). She builds up her surfaces, obliterating the images with marks. Figuration is abstracted through layering and by defacement of previous marks. Even though in her method Mehretu uses sophisticated projectors and digital renderings that she traces, in the end it is still the primitive act of marking that is the basis of her work.

Schwabsky compares Mehretu's multi-layered compositions to the work of Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys— known as Constant —who along with Asgar Jorn and Guy Debord formed the European-based Situationist International (2002, p.214). Hal Foster reveals that the Situationist International wanted to revolutionize art and government, embracing the existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre (2004, p.391).

Tom McDonough reports that in a letter to the Situationist International Constant wrote, ' We ought to invent new techniques in all domains, visual, oral, and psychological, so as later to combine them in the complex activity that will produce unitary urbanism' ( 2002, p.75) . Through his art, Constant expressed the need for a cohesive society. In contrast, in her work Mehretu attempts to comprehend today's multi-faceted reality of social and political upheavals, rather than aspiring to a utopian concept of unity.

[Fig. 19 Constant, *Radierungen Zu New Babylon- Sector* 5.7 x 12.3 cm, Dry point, Collection Fondation Constant, 1970].

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[Fig. 20 Constant, *Radierungen Zu New Babylon-Toreno* 7.2 x 9.8 cm, Drypoint, Collection Fondation Constant 1970].

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By referencing objects, places, and creating stories through mutating marks and spatial shifts, Julie Mehretu alludes to the disintegration of past and present civilizations. While Constant's panacea is an anti-consumerist utopia, Mehretu offers no solutions; her paintings present aspects of civilizations that have been damaged or destroyed, implying a dystopian aftermath of catastrophe. It is fascinating to see the similarities in the work of these two artists, separated by decades, different moments in history, and dissimilar points of view: Constant's post war hope in constructing a new society, and Mehretu's contemporary critique of society's breakdown.

As for Julie Mehretu's exhibition of new work at Marian Goodman, a change has taken place with expressionistic painting as the central focus. Robin Pogrebin highlights the work *Conjured Part (eyes) Ferguson* where the artist uses a flurry of gestural brush marks and handprints to suggest the Missouri shooting of African-American Michael Brown by a white policeman, Darren Wilson (2017, p.2).

[Fig. 21 Julie Mehretu, *Conjured Part (eyes) Ferguson*, Ink and acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 243.8 cm, Marian Goodman Gallery 2016].

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In Pogrebin's interview concerning Mehretu's recent paintings and etchings, the artist describes them as a break from her former process (2016, p.2). She has eliminated using assistants to trace imagery and relied on herself to create the marks. Additionally, this new work reflects her responses to world events with the tone of the exhibition being a foreboding one. Because of the directness and richness of gesture, this new development appeals to me more than Mehretu's projected paintings.

[Fig. 22 Julie Mehretu, *Epitaph, Damascus* Photogravure, sugarlift, aquatint. spit bite, open bite, 217 cm x 87 cm, Marian Goodman, 2016].



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One powerful work, *Epitaph Damascus*, with its rough, expressionistic black marks, again calls to mind Bataille's notion of the mark being simultaneously creative and destructive, as well as Adorno's thoughts on dissonance. This energetic, six-panel etching has the simplicity of Asian ink painting with brisk, inky marks that soften into black, cloud-like patches. The title nudges the meaning of this abstract work toward death and war.

## Dislocation

### *International Migrant Manifesto*

Tania Bruguera (2011)

'We have been called many names. Illegals. Aliens. Guest Workers. Border crossers. Undesirables. Exiles. Criminals. Non-citizens. Terrorists. Thieves. Foreigners. Invaders. Undocumented' (*The Restless Earth*, p31).

According to Giorgio Agamben, 'The present circumstance of massive demographic shifts-owing to warfare and political repression as much as emancipatory desire-the refugee represents "the paradigm of a new historical consciousness", particularly with that figure we glance a future beyond nation-state and its destructive exclusion of noncitizen' (Demos, 2017, p. 19).

As a legal alien, I am aware of the challenges living in a country where the language, customs, and religion are not part of one's heritage. In 1987, going to Milan police headquarters for my residency permit for the first time, I was the only person waiting in the United States queue. Next to me, African nationals waited outside the building and around the block. Thirty years later I returned to the same place to submit my Italian citizenship request, only to see streams of Africans and Syrians going back and forth between two buildings in a five-block radius. I live in a country where thousands of displaced people are entering every week seeking asylum

and seeing many of them on a daily basis in Milan planted the seed of my decision to try to bring contemporary social realities into the scope of my painting.

T. J. Demos specifies, 'Hannah Arendt wrote of "refugees driven from country to country" in the midst of the unprecedented genocide of the Holocaust not as mere victims; rather, for her, they "represent[ed] the vanguard of their peoples" (2017, p.19). Ignoring migration will not make it go away; Demos believes that looking at migrants as people first and foremost is the way to establish 'politics of equality' (2017, p.25). I address this topic in my work as a way of confronting and questioning my beliefs, those of the viewer, and possibly opening up discussions.

My current practice concerns my relationship to the refugee situation in Milan. I began thinking about migration after being fingerprinted in Milan's police headquarters for a document I needed in order to apply for Italian citizenship. I spent hours that day at the station, where many young Eritrean immigrants were also being fingerprinted. Because the FBI criminal records background check stipulated ink prints, I was having prints done the slow, old-fashioned way; the Eritreans were being electronically fingerprinted. Unfortunately, I was within earshot of the police technician shouting questions at them and I could see their terrified faces.

Together with this incident, I had become friends with a Nigerian man living in Milan. The harrowing story of his two-year voyage to reach Italy spurred me to attempt to address dislocation in my work. No longer is it possible to just come and go as one pleases. We must be identified, scanned, x-rayed, fingerprinted and photographed; without identification, we do not exist. Identity is an important issue for the thousands of people who have sought refuge for political freedom. These people have been welcomed to ports of entry all over Italy, a point in favour of Italian laws that promote tolerance and human rights.

### Experimentation with Painting Supports

Coming to the University of East London's Professional Doctorate programme from Italy also brought up the dilemma of transporting my paintings back and forth. Thinking about this, I recalled a work that has always inspired me: Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise*. Foster describes how

for this piece the artist painstakingly fashioned a mobile museum retrospective, replicating sixty-nine versions of it with meticulous printmaking techniques (2004, p.275). The word 'boîte' has frequently been erroneously translated into English as meaning box. Instead, boîte is slang for a place of work such as office, or workshop, or in the case of an artist, studio. With this in mind, I set out to make work that could be easily and economically shipped or carried in a suitcase from Milan to London and back.

[Fig. 23 Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte -en -Valise*, assemblage, dimensions variable. Leather valise containing miniature replicas, photographs, and color reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one "original" (Large Glass, collotype on celluloid), (69 items) overall 16 x 15 x 4" (40.6 x 38.1 x 10.2 cm). IX/XX from Deluxe Edition. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. James Thrall Soby Fund. © Succession Marcel Duchamp ARS New York/ADAGP Paris 1998. Photo: John Wronn, ©1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1935-1941].

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I began by cutting up a number of large-scale canvases painted during my MA years, and mounting selected rectangles of painted canvas to heavy pieces of paper. From those pieces evolved *Travel Log*, an accordion-style artist book. Metaphorically, the book refers to painting as an incomplete voyage and an unending, internal search.

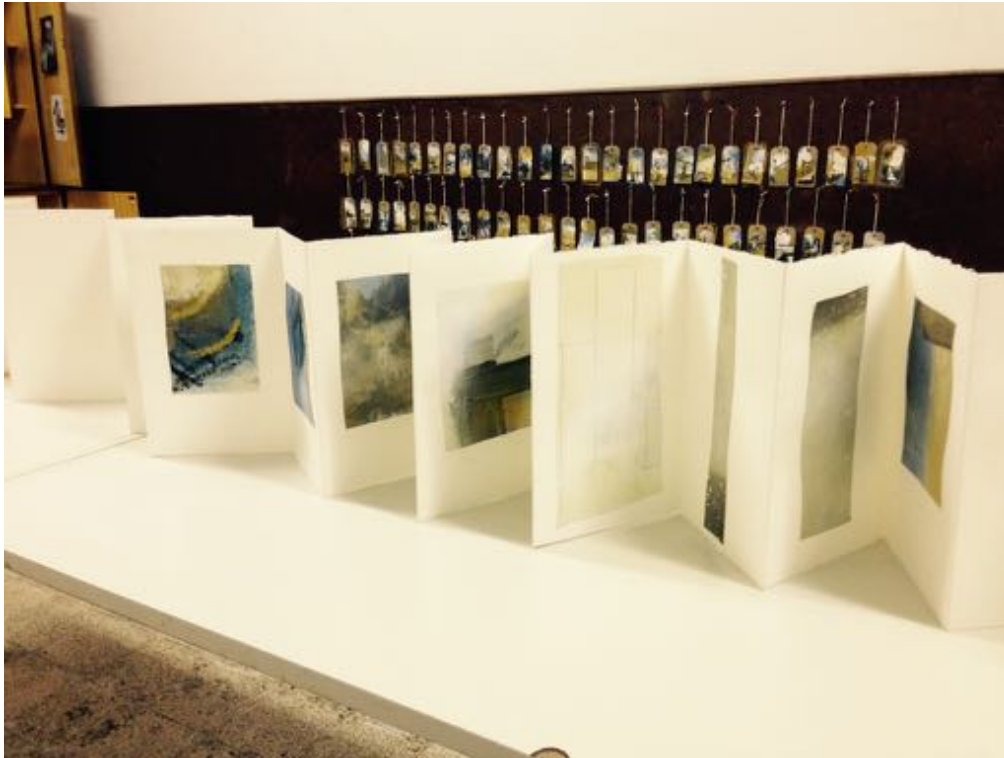


Fig. 24 Mary Crenshaw, *Mary Travel log*, Oil on canvas mounted on paper, 300 cm x30 cm  
2015.

[Fig. 25 Francisco Goya, *Autorretrato/Self Portrait*, 18 cm x 13 cm, Oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain, 1795].

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Visiting the National Portrait Gallery's extensive 2015 Goya exhibition, I was struck by a seven by five inch self-portrait of the artist. This unpretentious work stood out for me because of the densely painted tie area that appeared abstract at close range. Consequently, thinking that bigger is not necessarily better when it comes to good painting, a few days later, while waiting for my flight home in the Gatwick Airport shops, I spotted some brown paper luggage tags, the same size as Goya's miniature self-portrait. Attracted to the tan colour of the tags, I purchased all five packs that were in the store.



Fig. 26 Mary Crenshaw, *Landscapes on 100 Luggage Tags*, Oil, charcoal, enamel spray paint on paper luggage tags, dimensions variable, 2015.

For *Landscapes on 100 Luggage Tags* I coated the paper luggage tags with rabbit skin glue instead of gesso, to keep the brown paper visible. Then, I painted the tags with oil, drew into the paint with charcoal and sometimes collaged remnants of cut-paintings. With spray paint, I unintentionally added indexical impressions on the wall of my studio. The messy interventions gave the tags a feel of being consumed, as though they had a history.

As a way of suggesting landscape I used limited colours: lamp black, yellow ochre, and ultramarine blue, flake white, and charcoal for drawing. Since the strings were varying lengths the result was an imperfect grid when the tags hung, grouped together on the wall. Once installed in the *Stanze* exhibition, I decided to place the tags randomly in a few areas, as a way of adding movement and breaking up the grid pattern.

The theoretical research that fed the development of *Landscapes on 100 Luggage Tags* was Rosalind Krauss' writing on the index. The tags have indexical signs in the form of my fingerprints and spray enamel on the tags and wall accidentally gave rise to indexical signs that refer to the tags themselves. Julie Mehretu's recent work confronting world events via

hand and fingerprints in *Conjured Part (eyes) Ferguson* –accentuated the fact that the indexical sign can be a powerful vehicle of meaning. Considering the way Mehretu's paintings evoke cultural upheaval, displacement, and violence was a step to understanding how to make my abstract work speak more clearly to me of the current European migrant crisis. Fabienne Verdier 's paintings influenced the making of this piece because of how she implies landscape through gesture, as did the palette, ambiguous political content, and varied materials of Kiefer's work.

Michael Corris describes how in *Hand Grenades* Susan Hiller features tags dangling from glass vials that contain ashes of paintings she deliberately destroyed (Gallagher, 2011, p.41). Unlike Hiller, I did not burn my paintings, but was radically changing them. My tags function as individual paintings that create a whole work, whereas Hiller's tags identify each burned painting separately. Hiller also displayed her tags in a group. My tags do not identify, but represent a deliberate departure from traditionally stretched canvas and allude to travel and identity. Hiller's tags identify her destroyed canvases, and thus her break from painting. Identity, destruction, and an attempt to transform her painting practice are undercurrents in Hiller's work that have inspired me in my practice.

[Fig. 27 Susan Hiller, *Hand Grenades* Ashes of paintings, 12 glass jars, rubber stoppers, tags, in Pyrex bowl, 1969-1972].

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An artist friend unexpectedly dropped by my studio shortly after I had finished the tag piece. He commented on how different the piece was from my former work, and how he enjoyed the worn and dirty look, because of the charcoal smudged on the white strings. He noticed the unintentional indexical marks the spray paint had created on the wall. So, I decided to use the spray paint-indexes when I installed the work in *Le Stanze*.

I presented this piece in *Le Stanze*, together with other related work. During the exhibition, viewers were interested and spent time close-up, looking at the individual tags. At first I had hung them in a grid-like formation, similar to the above photograph, however, I decided to

place them randomly, as if they were migrating, and the result was less static. Also, I showed images of *100 Luggage Tags* in my first UEL Work in Progress slide presentation. Feedback was that it worked well with my topic, but needed developing.



Fig. 28 Mary Crenshaw, *100 landscapes on Luggage Tags*, installation, Milan, 2016.

After completing this piece, I attempted various ways of making my own luggage tags. I cut paintings on paper, I toyed with size, and assembled groups of various painted tags. This led to cutting and stitching larger paintings on paper. When I showed images of this body of work to one of my supervisors, she noted that it appeared decorative, and I agreed.

As a consequence of the small scale that I had chosen to use, I had become too careful and was not allowing process to emerge. The exploratory cut paintings on paper with thread that followed had some interesting aspects, such as layering imagery with text and being folded to fit into a small suitcase, but were without strong visual impact. However, making this

unsuccessful work, because I was folding and layering collage and paint led to the idea of layering in my painting.



Fig. 29 Mary Crenshaw, *Dirge*, Acrylic, collage on paper, string, 2015.





Fig. 30 Mary Crenshaw, *Stow away*, Acrylic, spray enamel, string, collaged Italian law book text. 90 cm x 30 cm, 2016.



Fig. 31 Mary Crenshaw, *City wandering*, Acrylic, collaged Italian law-book text, graphite, 70 cm x 50 cm, 2016.

Since my previously mentioned fingerprints made in Milan were illegible by the FBI's machines, I had to have them done again. I received this news in London while at UEL for seminars, so I went online and discovered a UK agency specialized in corporate crimes that did fingerprints for a hefty fee. The finger print technician made crisp, legible prints of all ten of my fingers. The contrast of the black ink neatly inserted in the FBI grid struck me as being possible material to work with. So, I took my fingerprints to the UEL print making room, where the staff helped me develop an idea. *Self Portrait* was the outcome.



Fig. 32 Mary Crenshaw, *Self-portrait*, Photolithograph, soft ground etching, monotype on paper, 70 cm x 50 cm 2016.

Photolithography, soft ground etching and monotype were the processes I used to make this print. First, I began with an enlarged, photo shop-inverted scan of my fingerprints. Then, through the photolithographic process a plate was produced, which I inked and printed on a large sheet of Somerset printmaking paper. After that, I made a soft ground etching on a plate the same size as the photolithographic plate and printed that on top of the same sheet of paper. The etching ink I applied in the final monotype stage added space and a depth to the composition created by the marks and colour.

The palette was blue black, and white, reminiscent of the simplicity found in Asian ink painting and calligraphy. I left space on the various plates so that part of the imagery

underneath would remain visible. I used the photolithographic process in order to increase the scale of the standard FBI fingerprint card and soft ground etching because it is a tactile method for marking. It contrasted the orderly, stark, clean arrangement of the fingerprints on the grid. My decision to have a third layer was to create spatial composition with the marks and to add a colour.

By random placement of lines and impressions on the second soft-ground etching plate, I infiltrated the bureaucratic finger print form. For the final layer, I applied etching ink with pieces of cardboard to the monotype matrix and printed that. The strategy of using layering with various printmaking processes enabled me to gradually build up marks until I felt I had succeeded in covering the first photographic fingerprint image sufficiently so it was partially visible and recognizable, yet obscured enough to be transformed.

According to Rosalind Krauss, '...the abstract artist adapts his work to the formal character of the indexical sign' (1986, p. 218). In this case my fingerprints are the indexical signs that attest to my identity and also form the compositional base of this etching. Visually, they were meant to work abstractly and define space, but, the index provides meaning; in this case body parts that denote me.

Besides the index, when developing this work I thought about Robert Witkin's writing on Adorno's theory on dissonance. Adorno declares, 'Dissonance then becomes the truth about harmony, a true reflection of the human condition '. He also writes, 'The historical emancipation from harmony as an ideal has been an important aspect of the development of art's truth content' (1998, p.52-53). Reflecting on Adorno's concept of dissonance has opened up possibilities for me in my painting practice.

I tested this work by including it in my first year Showcase exhibition. When I exhibited the print, I attached it to the wall with office supply store clips suspended from nails. One tutor noted that the bureaucratic nature of the piece worked with this system. A fellow doctorate student said that I should continue creating more prints, developing this idea, especially because of the subject matter I intended to explore. The seminar leader felt that I could do a series of paintings from each individual fingerprint. I liked her idea, but believed my theoretical research was not relevant to a planned concept, with little room for letting the paint and marks take over.

While the experience of being fingerprinted by someone else was awkward, making the information on the fingerprint document illegible was enjoyable. As a result, I broke away from a rigid business procedure by adding my own expressionistic marks as information.

I wanted to employ process to develop something that I could not have imagined. This being the case, *Self Portrait* represents a step forward. Now that I use layering in my paintings, I realize that this work was a necessary stage in my present direction.

### Body Parts as Metaphor for Social Change

During the middle of my second year, having tried different painting surfaces and struggled with developing ideas, I decided my main focus should return to painting. Still wanting the work to be portable, I began a series of oil paintings on paper. After having spent the summer painting on numerous found portrait and vacation snapshots, I decided to introduce the figure. In these paintings I still wanted to attempt to confront notions of migration. Each day on the ten-minute walk to my studio from the underground, I encountered migrants, sometimes in pairs, on every street corner, with outstretched arms, baseball caps or plastic cups in hand, panhandling for spare change. This attempt at survival by seeking charity, once migrants reach Italian cities, it is an all too familiar sight.

The migrants were already permanent fixtures to people walking to and from work and going about their daily routines and I read that many of the migrants never interact with a single Italian person. Consequently, I began making quick paintings of arms, hands, baseball caps, and cups, using gesture, marks, and imprints. Through tonal choices I amalgamated the figurative aspects into the urban landscape. Linda Nochlin's essay *The Body in Pieces* was helpful in my thinking about adding these figurative elements to my work.

Nochlin's idea of the disjointed body, and how depiction of separate body parts alludes to society's collapse and renewal is an aspect that I contemplated. Nochlin explains, 'It is the French Revolution, the transformative event that ushered in the modern period, which constituted the fragment as a positive, rather than negative trope' (1994, p.8). The fragmented

body appears in the form of the index, where I applied paint with my hands and fingers, or traced my arm and hand: body parts as metaphor for social change.

Subdued colour, together with shapes mimicking tall buildings, construction machinery, and streets were elements that I incorporated to suggest Milan. I folded some of the larger sheets of paper twice as a way of making them fit in my carry-on luggage. With this body of work the primary concern was the abstract figure. In fact, I had just seen a Hokusai exhibition in Milan and was impressed at how easily the artist suggested figures with a few simple lines.

Again the work of Fabienne Verdier, and Anselm Kiefer were influential. I thought of Verdier's speed and her simple, direct paint application and the way Kiefer partially revealed his subject matter. The materials I used were Canson's Figueras paper for oil, oil paint, charcoal, and spray enamel. In this work, again Adorno's theory on dissonance in art and music came into play. 'Inside everything that can justly be called harmonious in art there are vestiges of despair and antagonism' (Witkin 1998, p.52).

One work fed another, with the drawing and colour palette being the same throughout the group. I decided to fold the larger pieces as a way of mistreating the work and having it fit in my suitcase in order to travel with me. I attached eyelets in the top two corners of each sheet of paper, so the paper could be nailed directly to the wall. Punching holes in the paper to insert the eyelets and nailing the paper directly to the wall affirmed that the work was not precious. It seemed to be an analogy to the violent, inhumane treatment of migrants. In the work that followed I decided to nail my canvases directly to the wall, instead of using stretchers. I installed the sheets of paper in a horizontal line to form a narrative sequence. The large folded works were hung on the opposite wall in the light well space.

Before my Work in Progress presentation, one of my supervisors looked at the larger folded paintings and felt the compositions were not working. She felt they were an inconsistent size compared to the portrait format of the smaller works and detracted from the coherence of the installation. Later, with the work that was to follow, this observation was beneficial. For the showcase, my paintings were approximately the same size, and this unified the body of work.

In addition, seminar feedback helped get me on track. One astute comment was that the migrants' lives in Milan and my life are conflicting, and that the layering was a successful approach to convey this tension. Another remark was to trust my judgement and add visual complexity that seemed lacking in some of the pieces. The general agreement was that I should work on a larger scale and develop the process in future work. This critique made me aware of the need to work bigger so the strength of my gesture could evolve. I decided to create my next series of paintings on un-stretched canvas. Canvas could be larger than paper and would be easy to transport in that it could be rolled and tucked in a shipping tube.



Fig. 33 Mary Crenshaw, Detail of *light well installation*- each work 30 x 40 cm Oil, charcoal, and spray enamel on paper March, 2017.





Fig. 34 Mary Crenshaw, *Detail light well installation*, 30 x 40 cm, Oil, charcoal on paper, 2017



Fig.35 Mary Crenshaw, *Detail light well installation* of folded oil paintings on paper, 50 x 60 cm each.





Fig. 36 Mary Crenshaw, Detail *light well installation*, Oil on paper, 40 x 30 cm 2017.



Fig. 37 Mary Crenshaw, *Spare some change?* Oil, oil bar, on canvas, 160 x 115cm, 2017.

*Spare some change?* represents the beginning of a series of works. I continued with the same scale, and materials in the four paintings that followed. Because of the positive response from fellow students and seminar leaders, I am working on a large scale and use a limited palette. I began by under painting patches of colour using a wide brush. Then I drew a couple of figures with outstretched arms, holding baseball caps. I began layering paint, in order to cover up the figures. In the final layer I drew shapes reminiscent of baseball caps and body parts on the painted gestures. The paintings that came directly after this piece include gesture, line and layering of deconstructed figures, imprints, shapes and traces.

This painting was the first successful one that I completed after deciding to work large. Before this piece, I made other large paintings where I experimented inserting words and phrases, but I felt the text was a distraction from the actual painting. As mentioned above, not stretching the canvas was a pragmatic as well as an aesthetic decision, or rather a pragmatic necessity that became an aesthetic choice.

My core concern was to see if I could attempt to tackle political issues while continuing to work abstractly. Layering my drawing and marks was how I resolved this question. Initially, I drew figures with outstretched arms holding baseball caps, to which I added elements—concrete-slab shapes, girders, arches, and yellow patches— evocative of Milan and Italian architecture. These areas of detail were purposefully made to pull in the viewer. After numerous false starts, with this painting I was finally on track. The grey areas were casually applied over previous painted shapes as a way of adding gesture and letting go of control.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, 'When we talk of the ever expanding boundaries and territories of the global world, we must not fail to see how our own intimate, indigenous landscapes should be remapped to include those who are its new citizens' (1994, location 4% 297). How can these people merge into European society and will this 'remapping' ever happen?

To create this painting, I used oil paint mixed with Gamblin's alkyd-based solvent-free gel to speed drying time, and oil bar on un-stretched canvas tacked vertically to my studio wall. By painting on top of the initial charcoal drawing, I purposefully obliterated the first marks. Brushes, rags, and a painting knife were the tools I used to apply the various layers of paint. For the final step, I drew with white oil bar as a way of interrupting the grey areas. I

considered Kiefer's sombre palette and how he reaches the viewer emotionally through his use of gesture and materials.

Before taking this painting to UEL to be displayed in the *Showcase* exhibition, I hung it at home on our living room wall so it would be completely dry before rolling it in a tube for shipping. Friends and family members who saw it reacted positively to the large scale and densely painted yellow areas, thinking that it looked like I had actually applied gold paint.

Comments from seminar leaders were: the painting was confident and demonstrated speed, the depth worked well, it was assured and exuberant, with a distinctive style. One leader remarked that it was a less 'polite' work than my previous year's work. Another observation was there is a bodily feel to the painting, by virtue of its scale and discernable figurative elements, yet the architectural devices unite the composition abstractly. Someone said that the paint application conveys excitement and a self-assured manual ability. It was also noted that there is an abstract-figurative debate in this work, with the shadows and traces resulting in an interesting ambiguity. Artists that came to mind were Joan Mitchell and Jean Michel Basquiat because of the dynamic, bold materiality. In addition, the seminar leader felt that the uniform size of the paintings and their irregular edges added consistency to the work as a whole.

The weeks I spent developing these paintings was an intense period of working. From March to the end of April I produced mediocre painting after mediocre painting. Then, at the beginning of May, I had to rush to the United States to visit my ailing nonagenarian father. Perhaps it was a needed break, perhaps for deeper reasons of the contemplation of mortality, a burden seemed to have lifted on my return and I experienced a new fluidity in my painting process. With the deadline approaching, I made quick paintings in two sessions, and was less fussy and careful with paint application. I was unsure about the result, but was elated at the positive response to this work when it was exhibited.



Fig.38 Mary Crenshaw, *Ciao mamma no.10*, Oil, oil bar, charcoal and spray enamel on canvas, 183 cm x 122 cm, 2017.

*Ciao mamma no.10* was completed a few days before I had to ship my work to London before the *Showcase* exhibition in June. Seminar leaders and fellow students singled it out as being the most successful work. Because for me it had come very easily, I did not at first agree. However, now I can see that the simple marks create space and movement.

There are figures underneath painted shapes and charcoal scribbles. The colours clash; the oval forms collide into one another, bouncing around the painted surface like a rockslide.

This painting is upbeat; a seminar leader stated there is pleasure and joy, with musical moments of energy and pause, and that there is a brilliant use of texture and tone with a sense of process that is very alive. Clearly acting on the previous seminar feedback had helped to move my painting forward, even if I myself was slow to understand the value of what I had done.

During my MA, professors were divided about my desire to address political issues in my work. Some believed this would detract from my expressionistic drips and splatters, where others encouraged me to confront these topics. I opted for what I felt at the time was the easy way out: abstract mark making. After I graduated, and away from institutional expectations, I created the *Southern Stories* series on the subject of the problem facing Italy of toxic waste, and corruption due to organized crime. My need to incorporate real-world imagery and issues into my work runs deep. When I started the Professional Doctorate at UEL, I was determined to find a way to make abstract work that tackles social issues.

Figure and Landscape



Fig. 39 Mary Crenshaw, *Living in shadows*, Oil, charcoal, oil bar on canvas, 215 cm x 56 cm, 2017

In *Living in shadows*, I wanted the imagery to be simple and direct, like the gestures of Verdier, yet with abstract outcomes obtained through layering by Mehretu, and with the expressive energy of Kiefer's dense paint application. I thought about different aspects of the Italian migration situation, where daily encounters with migrants sparked the title.

In this painting there is stark light and dark and contrasts of colour, with drawing that mimics open structures of a city combined with the round shape of the baseball caps migrants use for panhandling. These lines have a dual spatial reading. Other marks, like the white marks on the bottom left resemble a calligraphic figure. An accidental shape on the bottom left looks like the boot of Italy and patches of densely applied yellow ochre suggest Italy's rocky terrain. Black charcoal marks on the Italian-boot shape float on the surface, possibly evoking the migrants' travel over land and sea to arrive at their final destinations: hostile environments where they will always be outsiders.

Dissatisfied with areas of *Living in Shadows* I tore both its length and width. After editing by tearing, I added final marks with charcoal and white oil bar. Lee Krasner is a painter who integrated cutting as an important process in her practice. Anne Middleton Wagner describes how, in 1953 and in a fit of frustration, Krasner tore up an entire series of works on paper and left the pieces on her studio floor, only to return a few days later and discover interesting aspects of drawing within the torn bits. Krasner then transformed the pieces into collages (1996, p.174). This initiated a process Krasner would return to throughout her artistic practice. In an interview with Barbara Novak, the artist stated that cutting and tearing her work might have been a way of refining the final outcome of her painting, and was why she considered cutting an essential part of her practice (1981, p.3).



[Fig. 40 Lee Krasner, *"Were you seeing"? CR 565 Imperfect Indicative*, Collage on canvas, 198 x 182 cm , 1976].

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Wagner writes that Krasner, living in the shadow of her famous husband Jackson Pollock, openly admitted her discomfort with the male chauvinism of the New York Abstract Expressionism art world. Though Krasner asserted that her work was autobiographical, Wagner suggests that there is an ambivalence and that cutting and reassembling was a tactic the artist used to avoid personal exposure. Her use of the genderless 'LK' as a signature suggests the desire to hide her identity as a woman (1996, p.180).

Admittedly, my tearing and cutting is a desire to edit parts of my painting/myself that I do not want others to see, possibly a connection to Krasner's strategy. However, the outcome seems to be positive in terms of the energy, variety, and development of the imagery. My own tendency to edit my paintings comes from a wish to experiment with composition and the residual torn strips are evolving as starting points for future paintings. Ripping off a swathe of canvas is a quick motion, much like the gestural application of paint on canvas. This way I eliminate unnecessary areas in my paintings that impair the compositions; instead of reworking weak areas, I remove them.



Fig. 41 Mary Crenshaw, *New to the city*, Oil, oil bar on canvas, 110 cm x 100 cm, 2017

*New to the city* is another edited, torn painting. I cut the original painting in half, so the square scale is different from the vertical rectangular format. I think this size might be most suitable for my body, since I am not a tall person. However, it is probably a good idea to continue to work large, since I am not sure how many more years I will be able to do so. This consideration creates a sense of urgency within me to make work. While painting, I forget my age and I am fortunate to still have the agility to climb onto and hop off of my scaffolding. Eliminating stretchers that are heavy to lift, move, and transport has been a practical, as well as aesthetic decision. I no longer have the strength for heavy lifting, but apart from that, at sixty-three I can still work for long stretches on my feet, get up the next day, and do it again.

One aspect of my process is to preserve energy and speed that produces surprise. But as a mature artist I have learned the value of pausing to reflect and evaluate what I have made. The reason I rip is part of this reflection process, where I slow down to consider, edit, and rework. This is also a point where I try to title the paintings as a way of allowing the real world to come into my work. How Mehretu's titles add significance indicated the possibilities of nudging the viewer toward certain readings. I do not want to pin down the meanings, but add associations. I want my titles to hold the viewer's attention similarly to how the marks surprise.

After I cut this painting, I marked the canvas with oil bar, then smeared the marks with my fingers. A grey figure at the top is concealed with lines that resemble building structures. Small figures are drawn throughout with charcoal and mid-left a grey rectangle echoes the head shape. Next to that, a black daub creates ambiguous receding/advancing space, appearing like a hole, or a solid, because of two white specks located on top. Lines angle off to the bottom right, forming a foot shape. To the left of that, there is another foot. These are disconnected portions of the figure at the top. Marks under the foot shapes accentuate the lines. In previous layers that show through I applied paint with the rubber sole of my son's discarded trainer. The title came after hearing about another wave of migrants fleeing civil war and entering Italy.

My supervisor introduced me to the elegant geometric paintings of Callum Innes. She felt the editing through cutting and tearing was a way of creating crisp edges— something difficult to achieve on un-stretched canvas— and that looking at Innes' work would be insightful.

[Fig. 42 Callum Innes, *Exposed Painting Oriental Blue*, Oil on linen, 120 x 118 cm. 2016]

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The edges are the focal points in Innes' work, where he leaves previous layers of removed paint stating in the video (Callum Innes, *In Two*), "It gives history to the work. It gives history to the viewer"... "It gives it internal space". It is interesting how Innes' off-kilter lines of the rectangles and squares play off one another within his compositions. The edges of my trimmed canvases are also imprecise, and this is a feature that when they are hung grouped together creates energy between them, much in the same way as Innes' imperfect geometric shapes. This is an artist I intend to pursue for future research, as a way of thinking about possibilities regarding the imperfect edges in my work.

Fang Zhaolin's exhibition of large ink paintings was held last June in Milan at the Palazzo della Permanente. She fused landscape with calligraphy, combining simplicity and detail. After looking at this fascinating Chinese expressionist painter and the watercolours of Callum Innes, I have begun thinking about watercolour as a possible medium for future large-scale works on paper. Fang Zhaolin's densely painted areas resonate against the stark white space of her rice paper. This contrast is something to explore in my painting, as a way of giving breath to my compositions.

[Fig. 54 Fang Zhaolin, *Signora del Celeste Impero*, Ink, coloured pigments on rice paper, 120 x 80 cm, 1996].

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Huma Bhabha's sculpture was on display in the foyer of the National Gallery when she was a finalist for the Fourth Plinth in January 2017. Humble materials— polystyrene, wood and cork— make up Bhabha's sculptures that fuse human form with architecture and address issues of race and identity. Seeing this particular piece sparked an idea as to how I might combine abstractions of the figure, landscape, and urban structures in my paintings.

[Fig. 43 Huma Bhabha, *Castle of the Daughter*, Cork, polystyrene, acrylic paint, oil stick, wood, 238.8 cm x 61 cm x 92.1 cm, 2016].

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Fig. 44 View from my studio window.





Fig. 45 Roccabascerana, Avellino, Italy



Fig.46 Self on scaffolding in new studio.



Fig. 47 Mary Crenshaw, *There's no room here 1 and 2*, Oil, oil bar, charcoal on canvas, 240 cm x 110 cm each, 2017.

The title *There's no room here 1 and 2* are two separate paintings that I decided to hang together for my exhibition at *Spazio Arte* where there was only one large wall in the gallery. These two worked well together, so I left them there, leaving much needed surrounding space. The title came from hearing about the closure a migrant housing centre in Turin because of protests from local residents. This is work I began last summer in my newly-renovated studio in Southern Italy, where there is much more room to work than in the three by five metre Milan space I have used for the past twenty years. I was influenced by the light, colours, and terrain that is much different from Northern Italy. Milan is flat and the sky is notoriously overcast, due to smog because of its close proximity to the Alps. In *There's no room here 1* (left) I built up the paint applying it in layers with rags. The rocky and irregular shapes in the top were applied with a painting knife.

In *There's no room here 2* (right) I began with painting the dark areas all over, trying to leave white canvas showing through. I covered the top half in blue, using a wide house painting brush and on the bottom half light ochre marks quickly applied with a smaller brush. Since I

could not seem to resolve the blue area, I decided to do something drastic. In a recent art supply order, I had received a complimentary thirty-millilitre tube of Gamblin's torrit grey, a colour the company makes once a year when the factory's air filters are cleaned. Torrit grey is luscious because it is a combination of every colour Gamblin produces. Because I had such a small amount, I decided to add the entire tube wet-into-wet to the previously applied white marks. The result was oppressive and heavy, a ball shape that weighed on the energetic marks underneath. I drew lines and rectangles on the bottom in an effort to further subdue their energy. Many of the painted marks in this area are in opposition to one another, trying to find refuge among the controlled debris.

The rocks and avalanches that appear in my work allude to Italy's unstable political and geological landscapes. Both terrains are volatile, where governments suddenly crumble, and seismic shifts in the earth's crust devastate Italian cities and topography. Last August my husband and I were enjoying a drink on the terrace of a small restaurant in Ischia, where we had gone for the weekend. All of a sudden for a couple of minutes it felt as if our chairs were suspended on jelly and the table settings pitched. Panic ensued, and people began calling other parts of the island to see how much damage there had been. Regrettably, two people were killed from falling rubble in buildings that were not up to code.





Fig.48 Damaged wall after Ischia Earthquake, August 21, 2017



Fig. 49 After the Ischia Earthquake, August 21, 2017.

## Communicating with a Personal Visual Vocabulary

[Fig. 50 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, Oil on canvas, 349 cm x 777 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1937].

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In *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings*, Herschell B. Chipp analyses in-depth this historic painting and explains how Picasso was able to effectively communicate outrage at the atrocities of war and genocide by means of a personal visual vocabulary he had already been using for decades, that of the minotaur/artist and horse/model.

Chipp explains, 'It was no coincidence that for his first attempt of the mural Picasso chose the only moment in the bullfight when there are no victors, just victims. The selection of this minor but poignant event as the starting point for what was to become *Guernica* strongly indicates that rather than attempt to re-create a disastrous event he had not even witnessed, he was searching for a motif of personal significance that would convey the intensity of his feelings about it' (1989, p.71). I was encouraged in the seminar to consider my lived experience of displacement-both my own and the discomfort of contacts with migrants in daily life.

Asked to represent Spain in the 1937 Paris World's Fair, Picasso began the painting twenty-four days before the opening ceremony. He decided that this painting would be a protest against the horror that had taken place in his native country, especially after the French government had decided on a policy of non-intervention towards the Spanish people. Referring to the many small preparatory pencil sketches, he created the initial outline in paint on the large canvas that was documented by Dora Maar.

[Fig. 51 Dora Maar's documentation of the first stages of Picasso's *Guernica* ,1937].

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I am interested in Picasso's treatment of a political theme, but also the insights the photo documentation gives into his working methods. Picasso developed imagery for *Guernica* from small, preparatory sketches of the different players in the painting—the horse, the bull, the screaming woman— without planning out the entire painting. The image evolved on the canvas itself. This appeals to me because of my own direct, unpremeditated way of working. Making small sketches in preparation for a larger work could be used simply as a warming up exercise, but it could also help me visualize possible solutions.



Fig. 52 Mary Crenshaw, *A last resort*, Oil on canvas 160 x100 cm, 2017.

In *A last resort* I used good quality Michael Harding paint, where a small amount will cover a large area. I added Venetian red to my palette in the under painting and in the final layers with Venetian red oil bar. To begin, I traced my son's head, shoulders, and arm in charcoal. After applying the first thin layer of colours, I added thicker yellow ochre shapes, applied with a plastic house-painting squeegee. Later, I drew into the ochre shapes with red and white oil bar, which I then scraped and blended with the edge of the squeegee. Next, I added the black shapes, again with the squeegee, and finally more oil bar marks. I intended for the black shapes to vaguely echo the main figure. The black shapes form voids around the central figure, but also simultaneously can read as marching through what could be interpreted as landscape.

I feel this painting is successful. There was no reworking, just waiting for the layers to dry. This, along with the body-like scale based on the span of my arm, gives the painting an immediacy, and a layering of complex marks. There are areas of dense paint and washes, areas of energy versus calm, and areas of shifting, ambiguous space.

Gerhard Richter has used a squeegee-like tool for painting over the years. The painting *S. with child* (1995) demonstrates how he effectively used this technique to alter the painting's surface and composition. This direct approach demonstrates Richter's ability to incorporate gesture in paintings, combined with careful copying of photographic imagery.

[Fig. 53 Richter, Gerhard, *S. with Child (S. mit Kind)*(1995) oil on canvas, 52 cm x 62 cm  
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg].

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The blurred areas in *S. with child* have covered the top part in a textured pattern, where the oil paint has broken up because of the dragging motion and pressure of Richter's tool. Bands at the bottom are the result of scraping off paint. The only apparent remaining part of the figure is a hand. Smearing the wet paint added movement, depth, and texture to Richter's imagery.

Benjamin Buchloh refers to Richter's 'sfumato' technique, 'where the harshness and persistence of the photographic representations have to be negated by the effacement of their iconicity, a loss for which apparently only painterly nebulae can compensate' (2009, p.95). In *S. with Child* the pressure of the wiping tool is light, where the former layer has been smeared, but remains partially visible. It is interesting in this painting to see how Richter creates various spatial perspectives by removal, as well as depositing and dragging thickly painted areas across the surface. Now that I have introduced the squeegee, there is much I can develop from observing the technique in this one Richter painting.

In September Michael Werner Gallery in London hosted the exhibition *Per Kirkeby: Paintings and Bronzes from the 1980s*. I had recently seen a Kirkeby exhibition at the Mendrisio Museum in Switzerland, but found the larger paintings exhibited there— many executed using acid greens and yellows— not as exciting as the paintings on display in London. The paintings at the Werner Gallery had more depth because of Kirkeby's dark, earth-toned palette that contrasted with patches of white throughout his compositions. The white intensified the layering and created areas of pause between the other gestures. Using white effectively as Kirkeby does is not easy. This is something I think about, understanding that if used sparingly white has the power of opening up structural areas of space.

[Fig. 55 Per Kirkeby, *Untitled*, oil on canvas 116 cm x 95 cm Michael Werner gallery, London, 1981].

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Fig. 56 Mary Crenshaw, *Trudging*, Oil, oil bar on canvas, 95 x97 cm, 2017.

I edited *Trudging* through cutting, eliminating elements that had become too figurative and integrating them into the composition abstractly. I salvaged the central area with the white gestural mark because it opened space to the rest of the densely painted areas. Kirkeby's solution adds a dimension to the painting that mine lacks. The white area in my work sits on top, adds movement, and works as an ambiguous shape. The white shape in Kirkeby's defines the overlapping form across the picture plane on the right. Looking at Kirkeby's layering informs me of solutions I had not thought of as far as creating space in dark works.

In the Kirkeby Mendrisio Museum exhibition there was a large bronze sculpture that, like the work of Huma Bhabha, combined through abstraction figure with landscape. Hardly discernible at first glance, there are two legs that emerge from the centre of the massive rock-like form. The ambiguity and mystery that Kirkeby achieves in his compositions, whether they are paintings or sculptures, is what I appreciate. These imprecisions force the viewer to participate, and linger a bit longer to take in the details. The imagery seemed to slip and shift, registering as abstract one moment, and figurative the next, a quality that I would like to strive for in my work.

[Fig. 57 Per Kirkeby, *Heracles*, Bronze, 370 x 230 x 80 cm, courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery, 1991].

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### Materials and Meaning

Reading *Materiality* helped me reflect on the significance of paint as material and how it is central to my artistic practice. Pennina Barnett writes, 'Griselda Pollock explores the idea of a visible tactility that touches the internal organization of the drive through materiality and structure rather than through representation' (2015, p. 78). Though certain elements in my work are representational, my goal is to make these figurative elements work abstractly, either by partially hiding this imagery under layers of paint, or through use of indexical signs such as fingerprints. This is where materiality takes over and the paint becomes the central focus. Barnett observes, 'For what is matter but "a particular and very condensed form of energy, energy not yet aware of itself..." "—a nothingness of being which could also be a beginning" (2015, p.78). It is interesting to regard paint as imprisoned, escaping from its container and expressing its vitality.



At the 2017 Venice Biennial, Mika Taanila's books in the Nordic Pavilion drew me in because of their small scale. The way Taanila works both figuratively and abstractly was what interested me initially, as well as the spontaneity and the layering he employs in his cuts. Taanila's works are simultaneously humorous, as in the sawed book *Scenes from a Marriage*, and poignant; I could look at them over and over, and find new meaning at each viewing.

[Fig. 58 Mika Taanila, *Prepared Cinema Books*, Cut book, dimensions variable, 2017].

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[Fig. 59 Mika Taanila, *Prepared Cinema Books*, Cut book, dimensions variable, 2017].

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[Fig. 60 Mika Taanila, *Prepared Cinema Books*, Cut book, dimensions variable, 2017].

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Alan Sekula wrote in 1979, 'Suppose we regard art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience. Art, like speech, is both symbolic exchange and material practice, involving the production of both meaning and physical presence' (1979, p.163). Some years later in his seminal book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud wrote of 'the possibility of a relational art (an art that taking as its

theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context) rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space...'(2002, p.14).

An artist whose work is not only visually compelling, but who also forms collaborations with marginalized people surrounding his practice is Mark Bradford. Bradford's installation in the United States Pavilion has evolved from his work from a few years ago where he collaged found brochures and advertisements from his Los Angeles neighbourhood. In his Venice installation Bradford used a dense amalgam of paper combined with a binding medium applied to large canvases. The underlying theme in this artist's work refers to African American history that includes repression and servitude.

This is evident in his titles: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the title of a gospel song about slavery and James Baldwin's autobiography about growing up as a black and gay man in the United States, and *Tomorrow is Another Day*—the title of Bradford's entire Venice installation— the last line spoken by Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, another reference to slavery and white oppression. Process Collettivo (2017) is a non-profit organization Bradford recently established that works with inmates in the Venice prison, where they create bags from recycled vinyl advertising banners and cultivate organic vegetable gardens. This offshoot from his art practice supports Bradford's core beliefs in social interaction and regeneration.

Mark Bradford is an artist I can look to for future work, and the possibility of incorporating materials that would add meaning to the content of my paintings. During my most recent Work in Progress presentation, someone mentioned that it could be interesting to add sand or earth from outside of my studio in Roccabascera. Introducing materials from my surroundings would be a possibility worth exploring.

[Fig. 61 Mark Bradford, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Mixed media on canvas, United States Pavilion, Venice Biennial, 2017].

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[Fig. 62 Mark Bradford, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, Mixed media on canvas. United States Pavilion, Venice Biennial, 2017].

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Christopher Bedford describes how the artist finds and collects billboard signs taken from the surrounding area of his Leimert Park studio and then soaks them in large, water-filled containers. He then uses a technique of 'de-collaging', gluing the signs directly to the canvas surface, without any preconceived idea of what he will make. Bradford glues, cuts, layers, and scrapes, believing that the speed in his work corresponds to his former job as a hairdresser. His process embraces chance: "I just keep moving"(2010, p.12).

I have never before considered that my occupation as a hairdresser could have anything to do with the speed of my work. In retrospect, this physically demanding job got me accustomed to being on my feet, and strenuous long days of being physically active. In my painting practice, I am always moving as well, and when I am not, it is to reflect on the work that I have done. Like Bradford, I embrace chance, and do not have a preconceived idea of what will be the end result of a piece.

In Bradford's first works, hairdressing supplies and chemicals for curling or straightening hair were used to introduce his African American experience into the abstract painting discourse. Bedford clarifies that Bradford's materials became the subject matter (2010, p.16). The flyers and brochures the artist collects are abstracted through collage and lose their meaning, becoming, according to Bedford, anthropological debris (2010, p.19). Bradford's mediums refer to the present and the culture in which he works. Reassembling these collected printed papers that represent specific events, he forms something entirely unplanned and new, breaking away from traditional abstraction because of the association to contemporary life, which Bedford designates, 'Realist Abstraction' (2010, p.27).

Bedford notes that Bradford alludes to present-day existence not only through his materials, but also in his titles. *Strawberry*, from 2002, is a colloquial term for a woman who sells her

body to procure drugs (2010 p.27). Titles of my paintings have become an important way of communicating aspects of my surroundings and I use words or phrases migrants say to me in passing, or snippets taken from articles from the free daily newspapers given away in Milan's underground stations. I gave a recent series of five paintings the following titles: *Three to a mattress*, *One bowl of rice a day*, *New Accommodations*, *Without a roof, without a kitchen*, and *Give me money for something to eat*. Seeing how successful Bradford's titles reveal additional information makes me feel like I am on track. Mark Bradford, like Julie Mehretu, successfully conveys meaning to the viewer through his titles, and his wry approach is yet another way of doing this successfully.

## Retaining Immediacy

[Fig. 63 Phyllida Barlow, *Phyllida Barlow: folly*, Views of installation in the UK Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, 2017].

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In an interview with Ronnie Simpson, Barlow stated that her aim was, "Taking the process of making to some sort of physical edge...Where weight would balance something or crush something so everything was going to be married in a kind of gesture" (2008, p.3). Barlow was the main reason I had to see this year's Venice Biennial; she did not dissappoint.

Like Bradford, Barlow chooses humble materials to create her site-specific installations. Throughout the UK Pavilion, there were areas of order and chaos; balance and instability. Enormous structures mimicked city details. Barlow's *folly* stirred up feelings of danger, suffocation, dread, elation, and celebration. The artist is in her mid-seventies and making ambitious work. Extremely brave and improvisational, her Venice installation contained elements of brutality, humour, and joy. Barlow inspires me to accept the brutal and clumsy elements in my own work.

In an interview with Amy Sherlock, Barlow states that, "...the notion of gravity pulling on things, making things collapse, and that potential to collapse" is present (2014, p.6). This idea of pulling and collapsing calls to mind cosmic energy, cell division, or a building construction site. I experienced an uncanny moment when leaving Barlow's Tate exhibition. Upon exiting the building and crossing the street, I spied a pile of cardboard a few blocks away, bundled together with string and brightly coloured red tape, leaning against a tree, obviously ready to be dumped in a bin. I wonderd briefly if it was something Barlow had planted there herself, because it was so strikingly similar to her work.

Like Mark Bradford, Phyllida Barlow uses the immediate urban environment of London as inspiration for choice of her materials. Harriet Baker relates how Barlow discovered sculpture in art school, after her tutor noticed that her paintings were 'sculptural'. She also mentions Picasso as one of her major influences, because he introduced everyday objects in his collages and sculptures. For Barlow, knowing when to stop is a dilemma, and she states that, "time, energy, and interest run out" (2015 p.3, p.5).

Knowing when to stop is also a dilemma I have, because of frustration with what I have made and not being detached enough from the painting. Spontaneity and energy risks being soffocated through over-working. Barlow's statement suggests how difficult it is to retain immediacy when too many marks begin to build up on the canvas. This is why I have become selective in my work and either destroy or edit unsuccessful paintings.

After having produced a few paintings that had obvious figures and showing these in my final work in progress presentation, there was discussion as to why I had included them. Usually, I begin with loose drawings of figures as a way of having underlying compositional structure and a starting point and then I cover up the figurative imagery with the layers of paint. However, in these paintings portions of the figures remained on the surface and distracted from my marks. My supervisors felt that the figures were self-conscious and I was not allowing for gesture and expression. The discussion helped me understand the weakness in these paintings. When I repainted the areas in question, the works improved immediately.

Barlow tells Baker , "...art defies logic and being categorized, and how it might not have beauty as its first objective" (2015, p.7). I struggle with this, sometimes settling on an ugly painting, because there are aspects such as density of paint, strong marks, and texture that represent interesting, unplanned outcomes. Alastair Sooke notes 'the lack of permanence, the lack of consistency, the fragility of life' (2017, p. 5) as qualities found in Barlow's Venice installation.

Sooke elicits from Barlow the difficulties of being an artist and raising children and having little time to spend in the studio (2017, p.8). I remember how challenging it was to work when raising my sons, because of the lack of time. This might also be a reason for the speed and urgency in my work, since family obligations and frequent unexpected situations arise that

require my attention still encroach on my studio time. For me Phillida Barlow represents a role model as a female artist. When Sooke asked the artist how she felt about her recent art-world attention, Barlow's reassuring reply was that any artist, after a lifetime of sustained artistic practice, should consider him/herself successful (2017, p.11).

## Professional Activities 2015-2018

### Professional Practice-Annotated List

#### Solo Exhibitions

November 25-December 10, 2017, *Mary Crenshaw*, Spazio Arte, Fara Gera d'Adda, Milan  
Seven oil on unstretched canvas paintings, various dimensions, two monotypes on paper, 70 x 50 cm.

March 2017, UEL Light well installation

*AVA Building Light well space installation*, March WIP seminar.

A series of oil paintings on paper, varying dimensions, two artists books, and three etchings.

#### Joint Exhibitions

2017

February 2017, *WIP*, Lundler gallery, Cambridge, MA, USA. Painted photograph mounted on paper.

June 2017, *Showcase 2017*, University of East London. Five oil, alkyd, oil bar, and charcoal on canvas paintings, 160 x 120 cm.

May 2017, *Wish You Were Here*, A.I.R. New York.

Collage and oil on paper, 20 x 13 cm.

March 2017, *A Titolo d'Ingresso*, Spazio Arte, Fara Gera D'Adda, Milan.

Oil on paper, 70 x 120 cm.

2016



December, 2016, *Clandestina*, Silmar Contemporary , Milan.

Four paintings on paper, two artist books.

August, 2016, *Stanze*, Palazzo Arcivescovile, Gropello, Milan.

Painted luggage tags, four large monotypes, two artist books, one collaged, painted, and deconstructed beauty case, and one suitcase lined with torn paintings on paper. August, 2016

July, 2016, *CAMAC Resident Open Studios*, Marnay Sur Seine, France

Installation of rubbings, collages, and painted photographs.

June, 2016, *Showcase 2016* University of East London.

Two etchings, painted photographs, and three mixed media works on paper.

2015

May, 2015, *Reclassified*, Warehouse XI, Cambridge, MA.

One monotype, 50 x 70 cm.

May, 2015, *Wish you were here*, A.I.R. Gallery, New York.

Painting, ink on paper.

April, 2015, *15/18*, Castello Borromeo, Milan.

Mixed media *installation*

## Residencies

2016, Centre D'Art Marnay (CAMAC) one month residency, Marnay -sur- Seine, France.

2015, Vermont Studio Center, one month residency, Johnson Vermont.

## Commissions

2017, Interiors, Tokyo, Japan. Various mixed-media works on paper and etchings.

2015, Interiors, Tokyo, Japan. Twelve works on paper, varying sizes.

## Fellowships

2017, Clark Hulings Fund Fellow

2017 Awesome Foundation finalist (to be announced late 2018)

2016, Ténor Foundation Bursary

2015, Vermont Studio Center, Merit Scholarship Grant

## Reflection on Professional Practice

### Solo Exhibitions

November 25-December 10, 2017, *Mary Crenshaw*, Spazio Arte, Fara Gera d'Adda, Milan

This solo exhibition was a chance to show some of the paintings I will show in the Viva. The gallery was small, and I only hung nine works, most of them large-scale. I installed two large paintings next to each other on the biggest wall. This led me to recall how the seminar leader mentioned that a consistent size strengthened and unified the work. Viewers commented positively on the monotypes on paper, and the textures and tones of the two large, gestural works. One person told me he thought it was interesting using the un-stretched canvas as a support, and felt that the curves and wrinkles that occurred worked well.

I attached everything to the wall with long nails, and pushed the canvases forward so they were suspended. Someone noticed this, and remarked on the intriguing shadows that occurred because of the space between the paintings and the wall. I plan on hanging the Viva work in this way. What I learned from this exhibition was that there needed to be a consistent size for interplay between the paintings, which seemed to be missing here. For future exhibitions I will take into consideration the actual exhibition space, which greatly affects the work. In my work toward the Viva exhibition, I will remember the concept of the paintings working together.

The topic of migration that I set out to address in my work, sparked conversations among people who commute to Milan and encounter the migrants on a daily basis. It was interesting to note the difference between people's reactions to my subject matter, because living in a small Italian town there is less contact with migrants. My intuitive and spontaneous approach to painting seemed to stretch viewer's imaginations. One man told me that he thought of Dante's *Inferno* when looking at the marks of the two large works side by side. Another

person mentioned that the canvases nailed to the wall reflected a certain fragility in the works and worked well with the topic. These observations led me to conclude that I had been successful in conveying concepts in my abstract works and carrying the ideas in the paint application and marks.

This exhibition made me realize the importance of exhibiting one's work and having solo exhibitions. How viewers interact is helpful in gauging if the work is communicating to people. Seeing the work outside of the confines of the studio allowed me to observe how my paintings held up in the gallery space. This led me consider how they might interact with one another, as a way of strengthening the next series of work.

*AVA Building Light well space installation*, March 2017 WIP seminar.

This installation was a pivotal moment in the development of my ideas and how to approach the subject of migration successfully using abstract painting. Remarks about making bigger paintings and developing the process guided me to work on a larger scale and to evolve compositions. The valuable insight from fellow professional doctorate students and supervisors, gave rise to my second year *Showcase* work. The concept of portable work was interfering in the progress of my paintings and I had forgotten that gesture needs space. I decided to work on unstretched canvas so I could increase size, while the work would still be easily transported. Showing this work was extremely helpful in moving my practice forward.

## Joint Exhibitions

2017

*WIP*, Lundler gallery, Cambridge, MA, USA, June.

It is always a challenge to participate in a show from abroad and I have learned to be pragmatic in choosing what to send. Participating in this exhibition reconnected me with friends from my MA days in Boston.

*Showcase 2017*, University of East London, June.

Seminar leaders received these five large oil paintings on unstretched canvas positively. They enjoyed the consistency of scale and the imperfect rectangular canvas shapes, noted an intriguing figurative/ abstract debate, and appreciated the bold materiality and the dynamic, confident paint application that was done with joy and pleasure. They wondered how I might preserve them. These remarks bolstered my confidence and were a deciding factor in continuing to develop the series for my final year exhibition. The comment on preserving the work led me to think about different ways of doing this. I am experimenting with cardboard tubes as a way of organizing the paintings in my studio. Since the longest tube I have been able to find is only a metre, I have been adding cut pieces with glue and tape, and tagging them with titles. This is an idea that needs developing. Another idea would be to create boxes similar to ones used to preserve Asian ink paintings.

*Wish You Were Here*, A.I.R. New York, May.

This is an annual fundraising exhibition of artists' postcards held by the A.I.R. gallery. I like to donate work, because over the past four decades this historic feminist gallery has helped women artists gain recognition.

*A Titolo d'Ingresso*, Spazio Arte, Fara Gera D'Adda, Milan. March

This was the gallery's first exhibition of the year. Each artist on the roster for a solo show in the months to follow was invited to exhibit. I was glad to participate and the artists were all seasoned professionals. I could not be at the private view because I was at UEL and realize that attending openings is important when one's work is on display. The success of this exhibition made me want to organize some joint exhibitions, and hopefully in the future I will be able to in this space.

*Clandestina*, Silmar Contemporary , Milan, December.

Viewers commented most on the small artist book I had made from a painted travel brochure and the large, folded paintings on paper. This feedback made me aware that the work is more successful when I am spontaneous in the paint application. The newly renovated exhibition space was in a prime location in the centre of Melzo, a town on the outskirts of Milan. This exhibition made me realize how enjoyable impromptu exhibitions can be and that I should become more spontaneous when an opportunity arises to exhibit on the spur of the moment. I met some new artists and made a few contacts of people interested in my work.

*Stanze*, Palazzo Arcivescovile, Gropello, Milan, August.

Painted luggage tags, four large monotypes, two artist books, one collaged, painted, and deconstructed beauty case, and one suitcase lined with torn paintings on paper.

The five large monotypes and painted luggage tags received the most comments and attention from viewers. It was a challenge to install the work I had created at the CAMAC residency in such a large space. Initially, I was worried that having worked small because there would be so much space to fill. In the end I felt that I could have eliminated a few pieces. Getting away from a white, pristine gallery space was enjoyable and stimulating. It made me want to participate in more exhibitions in spaces like this one. It was a good opportunity to exhibit because a lot of people came to see the show. Next year the building will be available again and it would be challenging to create new work for another show.

Installation. *CAMAC Resident Open Studios*, July.

My residency proposal was to create work for the *Stanze* installation and for the Professional Doctorate. I explored rubbings, text, and painted found photographs and comments from fellow resident artists helped me push the process. One person suggested that I remove the paint, which uncovered and destroyed the photographic images, giving unexpected outcomes.

another viewer suggested that instead of neatly arranging the work on the wall, I present it in a pile in the middle of a table.

*Showcase 2016* University of East London, June.

The two large photolithographic prints got the most attention from the seminar leader and fellow students, who felt that the subject matter of my fingerprints related to my topic. Afterwards, I made more large etchings, exploring various types of printmaking in which there were the indexical signs of my fingers.

My first year UEL Professional Doctorate work was experimental. I tried new printmaking techniques, and cut and collaged paper. Someone commented on the interesting way I hung the work. I investigated different approaches, but nothing had strong visual impact. I was caught up in the details of trying to figure out a direction. I learned that my work needed to be more consistent. This was a good experience, because I knew I needed to develop the work.

2015

*Reclassified*, Warehouse XI, Cambridge, MA, May.

Another exhibition with fellow Lesley University graduates, where I shipped work on paper to Boston. It is always a learning experience to send work to the USA from Italy. Luckily a friend helped, letting me send the work to her address in Boston and took it to the gallery. I included the return shipping fee, so FedEx picked up the work from the gallery once the exhibition was over.

*15/18*, Castello Borromeo, Milan, April.

I was approached by the curator to participate in this WWI commemorative exhibition, since I had recently started addressing the topic of war and migration in some of my work. The artist book full of gestural oil bar and spray paint drawings surprisingly received favourable notice, something that came unexpectedly. Viewers responded positively to my gestural drawings.

This is why I decided to continue with migration as a topic, because there was a lot to think about.

*Wish you were here*, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, May.

Another fundraiser for A.I.R. gallery.

*Open Studios*, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, Vermont.

During the open studio night at the VSC residency, fellow resident artists and writers commented on my large monotypes, where I used spray paint, and graphite marking. This is when I discovered the joy of monotypes, and vowed to make this kind of printmaking a regular part of my art practice. Now that I have a large studio space, I plan on getting an etching press so I can concentrate on prints, when I need a break from painting.

#### Residencies

2016, Centre D'Art Marnay (CAMAC) one month residency, Marnay -sur- Seine, France.

2015, Vermont Studio Center, one month residency, Johnson Vermont.

#### Commissions

2017, Interiors, Tokyo, Japan. Various mixed-media works on paper and etchings.

2015, Interiors, Tokyo, Japan. Twelve works on paper, varying sizes.

#### Fellowships

2017, Clark Hulings Fund Fellow

This bursary entailed a year of business classes for working artists. I learned how to craft an Investment Grade Proposal, write Field Reports, how to make a spreadsheet to track progress, and how to use Google Documents.

2017 Awesome Foundation finalist (to be announced late 2018)

I received a phone call from a Milan board member me telling me that I was a finalist for the grant and explaining that they liked the socially engaged aspect of my work.

2016, Ténor Foundation Bursary

2015, Vermont Studio Center, Merit Scholarship Grant

## Summary

*Representation Loses More and More Its Charm (1955)* by Tadeuz Kantor.

...Painting becomes a demonstration of life, a depository of diverse activities. I am fascinated by this play of chance with matter, this battle without victories or defeats this spectacle in which I do not at all play the principle character, and which holds me bound in passionate expectation of the unknown epilogue ( Selz, 1996, p.58).

The research undertaken during my three years in the professional doctorate at the University of East London has given me the knowledge I sought in order to enrich the content and visual impact of my paintings. Initially, the idea of small, portable work appealed to me, only to find that it was difficult to develop. After I discovered Saul Leiter's paintings on photographs I used old photographs from a Milan charity shop to paint and collage during my month residency at CAMAC in France. Bataille's theory on mark, Krauss' writing on the index, and migration as subject matter were my considerations when making imprints and painting these photographs. In the exhibition *Stanze* I installed this work in a cupboard, along with using a long table for *Travel log*, the adjacent wall for *Landscapes on 100 Luggage Tags*, a coat rack for a large painted photograph and the wall next to it for five monotypes. Viewers examined up-close the small painted images, but I felt this body of work lacked visual strength, so I decided to work larger.

Encouraged to make bigger work by peers and supervisors after a presentation in the light well of paintings on paper, I went on to work larger, on un stretched canvas. These paintings that I made in my second year featured in 2017 *Showcase* represented a step forward. I had been thinking about Mehretu's abstract layered paintings, and how she titles her work to confront humanistic topics. I titled work, either from phrases the migrants said to me in passing, or from newspaper articles. I began introducing quick drawings of figures on my canvases, then obliterating them under paint. Nochlin's, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, clarified for me that the body parts emerging from the process of covering could be assigned meaning and access other sorts of interpretation to the viewer.

Verdier's gestural paintings led me to read French philosopher François Jullien's writing on Chinese philosophical beliefs and notions on the importance of bodily energy, as opposed to



Western convictions of imposed will (Obrist, 2010, p.564). My vigorous paint application concerns this type of energy and recognizing this provided me insight into my painting practice. Adorno's theory on dissonance in relation to Kiefer's use of materials gave me ideas about spontaneous paint application. The sole of my son's discarded trainer, pigment sticks, a house painting squeegee, cardboard, rags and my gloved hands—besides the occasional brush—are the things I now use as painting tools.

My exhibition at *Spazio Arte* was an opportunity to understand the different possibilities of installing my paintings. I realized that surrounding empty wall space was essential, because of the large scale and how charged the work is. People noted the energy and were curious about the abstracted subject matter of my work. Visitors shared stories of their encounters with migrants; how my paintings sparked conversation was a positive and unexpected outcome of the exhibition. This discussion was proof that my exploration of significant artists has helped me develop my practice, specifically through the discovery of their various techniques and approaches.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Selected Private View Cards



### Exhibition *Stanze*



### Exhibition *A Titolo D'Ingresso*

Comune di **FARA GERA D'ADDA**

**S P A Z I O**  
**ARTE**

**ESPONE**  
**MARY CRENSHAW**



dal **25 Novembre** al **10 Dicembre 2017**

**INAUGURAZIONE** Sabato 25 Novembre 2017 ore 18.00

**ORARI DI APERTURA**

**Sabato** dalle 16.00 alle 19.00

**Domenica** dalle 10.30 alle 12.30 - dalle 16.00 alle 19.00



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Solo exhibition

## Appendix 2: Press Release

### Comunicato stampa

La pittura è morta? W la pittura...

Se ci fosse un vocabolario dell'arte, il termine "gesto" nelle opere di Mary Crenshaw ne sarebbe l'emblema.

***Gesto:*** movimento del corpo, delle braccia, delle mani ... che accompagna con fare espressivo una pittura virtuosa quanto convulsa.

Un deposito di materia, un registro da contemplare senza chiedere nulla

un modo radicale con il quale Mary fa sua una pittura violentata e sfregiata, che invita lo spettatore ad un'esperienza emozionale, visiva.

Come un angelo fustigatore l'artista ci svela un corpo d'opera che senza compromessi si ribella a chi della pittura, inutilmente, ne dichiara il funerale...

Corneliano Bertario, 2017

Pierre Poggi

### (Translation) Press Release

Is Painting Dead? Long Live Painting...

If there existed an art dictionary, Mary Crenshaw's work would represent the term "gesture".

Gesture: ' The physical movement of the body, of arms, of hands, that accompanies the making of virtuoso and convulsive expression'.

To deposit matter, a register to contemplate, without asking anything.

Like an angel-flogger, the artist reveals a body of work that, without compromise, rebels against pronouncements of the death of painting.

Corneliano Bertario, 2017

Pierre Poggi

## MARY CRENSHAW

Lo scheletro d'un pesce sulla sabbia in un paesaggio degli anni novanta e il gruppo di lavori sulle vite frantumate dei migranti presentati lo scorso autunno alla mostra "stanze" al palazzo arcivescovile di Gropello ci avevano già fatto intravedere nella pittura di questa artista, sotto la felice vena lirica e naturalista gli accenti di una profonda drammaticità. La Crenshaw non è mai stata "pacifica" ed ha puntato ora il suo sguardo sulle persone disintegrate che allungano un piattino o un logoro bicchiere di carta per raccogliere qualche spicciolo. Le nostre città ne sono piene. Torna in queste opere al grande formato, con una grammatica che appare semplificata. Grandi masse di colore pieno non saldate fra loro e frammiste al prorompere d'un segno vorticoso e spezzato. Non è un azzardo immaginare che questo segno nervoso è la trascrizione lapidaria di un gesto che si "deve" e che non si vorrebbe fare; mai pienamente dispiegato e come trattenuto dal pudore. Tuttavia la questione che si esprime senza equivoco e che ci raggiunge da queste pitture è quella della gestione della nostra facoltà visiva. Si può infatti fare finta di non vedere (e passare oltre), ma se questo esercizio di finzione diviene abituale allora c'è il rischio di una cronicizzazione reale e indistinta della nostra cecità. ...*"ciao signora, stai attenta che se non mi vedi, non vedrai davvero nessun altro...e nessun'altra cosa"*. In questi dipinti della Crenshaw sembra esprimersi già un punto "critico" di questa progressione verso la cecità. Ma è pur vero che il tipo di risposta provocata da un gesto faticoso di richiesta può avere il pregio di cambiare l'indirizzo di lettura di questo segno pregnante, facendone già una pur intermittente linea di sutura.

Enrico quieto – ottobre 2017

Mary Crenshaw (translation)

A fish skeleton in the sand from a series of paintings from the 1990s and the series of works about the broken lives of migrants indicated in *Stanze* last year, accent the profound drama underneath this artist's light, lyrical and naturalistic vein. Never tranquil, Crenshaw has focused her attention on dis-integrated people, the ones holding out plates or heavy paper cups to ask for spare change. Our cities are full of them. She returns with large-format works that possess a seemingly simplistic visual vocabulary: large masses of colour, disconnected from one another, mixed with broken and moving marks. It is no accident that these energetic marks pronounce something we are uncomfortable about, something we feel we should do, but are held back by shame. The artist asks that viewers participate. One can pretend not to see, but if the exercise of pretending becomes habitual, then there is the risk our developing chronic blindness. "Ciao signora, be careful. If you don't see me, you won't really see anyone or anything else". In these paintings Crenshaw critiques this/our progression towards blindness. Provoked by the migrants' tiring gesture of asking, we might change our interpretation of these penetrating marks that instead become intermittent, sutured lines.

Enrico Quietto, October 2017

## THE CLARK HULINGS FUND



### For Visual Artists

March 20, 2017 By Sofia Perez<<https://clarkhulingsfund.org/author/sofia-perez/>>

# Spotlight On... Mary Crenshaw



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# 2017 Accelerator Fellow

## **Where did you grow up?**

Richmond, Virginia.

## **When/how did you first know that you wanted to be an artist?**

When I was very young, maybe six years old, I was left alone in a classroom with a huge blackboard and some chalk. After a matter of minutes, I had filled the entire board with drawings. That's when I realized I was an artist.

## **Where do you currently live/work, and how would you describe the arts community there?**

I live in a small town outside of Milan, Italy, but I have a studio in the city. Since it is a big city, there's a lot going on exhibition-wise, but the arts community is dispersed, and this makes it difficult for artists. Most of my artist friends live outside of Milan, and we try to stick together, but life frequently gets in the way.

## **How would you describe your art to someone who's never seen it?**

My art falls under the category of contemporary abstract paintings. I vacillate between acrylics and oils, depending on the situation. Acrylics work well when there is a particular drying-time limit, such as a residency. Over the years, however, I have come to realize that the organic, voluptuous nature of oil paint is what appeals to me most. It is the sculptural aspect of painting and the way the paint describes space that is the essence of what my work is about. Color is not a main concern, and my palette is limited to just a few.





*Raining* by Mary Crenshaw

**What do you hope to communicate to your audience?**

What my work communicates depends on who's interpreting it, since the meaning is ambiguous. There is meaning in my work, but I want to transform figurative information into something else. At present, I am focusing on an aspect of the migrant situation in Milan. After migrants arrive here, they are not allowed to work, forcing them to live in the margins of society. Lots of them panhandle. I was struck by this while walking to my studio one day and decided to introduce abstractions of the human figure into parts of the urban landscape—ghost-like forms that blend in with the architecture. My goal is to have each viewer invent his/her own personal explanation of the marks and gestures and spaces that come out of this exploration.

### **What's been your biggest business challenge?**

Getting out of my comfort zone and initiating projects on my own has been a big challenge. Italy is a small country and opportunities for artists are limited, especially for women. Also, the Italian economy has been in a huge slump, lagging behind the US economic crisis by a couple of years. Things are improving, but for a while it was difficult to sell work.

One good thing about living in Milan is the location. It is easy to hop on a train or take a low-cost flight to any major European city, so I am trying to branch out and look for exhibition opportunities elsewhere. It has been a challenge, but it has also been a lot of fun, and I've forged new friendships with artists I would not have met otherwise.

### **Tell us about a business success and what you did to achieve it.**

Recently, my website has been getting an average of 700 views per month. I think this is indicative of the grants and fellowships I've been applying for, as well as past accomplishments, such as residencies and a commission in Japan.

### **How do you feel about today's technology (tools for your business, for creating your art, or both), and has it altered your way of doing business?**

I love it. Technology has revolutionized life for artists. I remember the days of shooting slides of my work, sending them through the mail, and waiting. Now, it is relatively easy to apply for residencies, exhibition calls, and the like.

Blogs, websites, Facebook, and Instagram have given me a voice. Sharing my images has been a great way of connecting with people all over the world. Also, I've discovered lots of call for artists—including the one for CHF's Accelerator—through Facebook and posts by friends.

### **What do you think about the state of today's art market?**

There seem to be many opportunities, but the market can also feel overwhelming. It was eye-opening to discover that only 16 percent of art is sold through galleries. There are possibilities that I need to learn more about, particularly online sales; that's something I definitely want to pursue. Also, I frequently make artist's books, and there might be a niche market for those that I should explore.

### **Give us an example of how you balance studio time with business time.**

I go to the studio as regularly as possible, usually four days a week, and I devote about two days a week to



Mary Crenshaw during a residency at France's Camac Arts Centre

business aspects. This varies, of course, but making time for business aspects helps to distance myself from the work. It's essential for me to clear my head and look at the paintings again after a break. Also, concentrating on the business side of my practice helps me feel like I'm still accomplishing something.

### **How have you evolved as an artist?**

I make conscious decisions to push myself, such as returning to school and attending artist residencies. Currently, I am revisiting printmaking; there have been many new developments in that field, and I want to build on my existing skills.

### **How have you evolved as an entrepreneur?**



The drawing that Mary made on the plane

The Internet has revolutionized the promotional side of being an artist. Communicating with others is essential to accomplishing my goals, and I've developed my entrepreneurial skills by reaching out to more people via the web. This has even helped me to do a better job of talking about my work in person.

Recently, I was flying back from London on a low-cost carrier. These flights are usually packed, but this time, miraculously, the seat next to me was empty. The man in the aisle seat was asleep, so I took out a ballpoint pen and began drawing on a newspaper. I was so engrossed in what I was doing that I didn't realize the man had woken up and was watching me draw. He asked me if I was an artist, and as it turns out, he was an art collector and had just

attended a few auctions in London. We talked the whole way back and exchanged emails. Before leaving the plane, I got him to hold up my drawing and took a picture of it, but I purposely left it behind, crammed into the seat-back pocket. (That was my original plan—I had intended the drawing as a conceptual piece.) When we said goodbye, he insisted that I email him about my upcoming shows, so now I have contact information for someone who really wants to be on my mailing list.

### **What role do artists play in our society? What role SHOULD they play?**

In our society, artists sometimes play the role of celebrity, but those whose work is meaningful provide sustenance for the soul.

For more information on Mary Crenshaw, see her official CHF bio</finalists/mary-crenshaw/>.

 Author

 Recently

### About Sofia Perez

Sofia Perez is the editorial director of the Clark Hulings Fund. A journalist and writer/editor with more than 25 years of experience, she has written for nearly every type of media and genre--from print and web publications, to TV, nonprofit advocacy, and fiction--and understands firsthand how important it is for creative professionals to learn basic business skills if they are to support their artistic endeavors. ([www.sofia-perez.com](http://www.sofia-perez.com))



## Also See:

Don't Wait to be Saved  
by a Gallery — CHF  
Interviews

Build a Career Piece by  
Piece — CHF  
Interviews Robert...

Building Confidence,  
Building Businesses —  
Q&A...

No Sacred Cows:  
Becoming an Art  
Collector — CHF...

## Cool New Stuff Coming Soon!

## Appendix 5: Publications

*St. Catherine's Now* magazine, Summer 2017, Vol.75 No. 2, *Living Language, In search of Conversation*, written by Kim Catley

...that turned exhausting from ... But after living in Milan for three ... not sustain a conversation with ... contributing the occasional joke.

They'll all tell you, it won't stay together. Cresshaw "always had to have extra help" in her French classes at St. Catherine's, except when it came to the accent. "I think I had the ear," she says. "That's the way I learned, by doing and hearing."

Tutors remember years spent studying French at St. Catherine's, gradually increasing vocabulary and verb tense. A summer program in Italy between her junior and senior years changed her approach.

When she arrived at her first job, she spoke a word of Italian, a gift by Carl Gagne helped her to conversation. Eight weeks later, she had day.

...experience learning a language ... learning to communicate in ...," she says. "It was so different."

...strawly a student at the ... of International Studies at ... teach with French at St. ... about thinking about ... Only she kept coming back. She ... into the French classroom, as ... there she studied German. And ...

...languages, or at least with the ... to Tutors, Cresshaw, Hamner ... out -- to Paris, Morocco, Beijing ... way back home again.

...not, they've absorbed the words ... to an understanding of how ... their ways of life.

### In Search of Conversation

**A**s she moves, divides, and spreads paint onto surfaces, Mary Cresshaw's visions of migrants -- with slumped shoulders and outstretched hands -- begin to take shape. Her abstract style captures the figures of political refugees flooding street corners, pandering for space (change). The government provides them with housing and food, but Italian law has prevented these refugees from seeking employment.

When she sees them, Cresshaw can't help but think of her early days in Italy, and her current pursuit of dual citizenship. She recently had a criminal background check and submitted her fingerprints to the FBI. Now she waits. It may be two years before her dual citizenship is confirmed.

But Cresshaw knows she stands in stark contrast to the refugees she paints on the street. "When I was getting my fingerprints done, I was in the room with people from Bosnia, and they were terrified," she says. "One man didn't know how to sign his name, he just did an 'X.' I'm this white person, privileged, and these people have been through who knows what to get here."

The same struck with her. She magnified her own fingerprints and created a series of sketches as a way to process what she saw. Even though she paints from a place of observation more than imagination, she still feels a connection, an unspoken conversation about the feelings of immigrating and finding home in an unfamiliar place.

"It's like two worlds colliding," she says. "I think a lot of European artists are looking at [this migrant situation], and feeling like we need to say something about it."

Mary Cresshaw '75 at work at an artist residency in France (St. Catherine's photo)

Mary Cresshaw's painting, entitled "Hope"





Catalogue *Stanze*, pages 28-31



I was a featured artist in 2016 on the website of Tokyo- based design store Interiors after the owners commissioned my work from Galleria L'Affiche in Milan.

## INFORMATION

**【5周年アニバーサリーキャンペーン】**

(2014年1月～)

The 5th anniversary.

erinteriors

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各作品は「エ・インテリアイズ」をご登録頂き誠にありがとうございます。  
 おおのけはまで3月14日(金)、5周年を記念として、  
 感謝をこめまして、3月14日(金)〜3月16日(土)にご来店頂戴したお客様に先着50名様様にインタラクティブデジタルアートをプレゼントいたします。

この機会に是非ご来店ください。

詳しくはこちらまでお問い合わせ下さい。  
[こちらをクリックしてください。](#)

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**【Mary Crenshaw 展示・販売のお知らせ】**

(2014年2月～)

アメリカ人アーティスト、Mary Crenshaw(メアリー・クレンショー)の  
 作品を展示・販売しております。

Mary Crenshaw(メアリー・クレンショー)  
 アメリカ・バージニア州生まれ。Virginia Commonwealth University  
 にて演劇・振付家育成。

かつてCremshaw Bartlettのダンスカンパニーを結成したのもちろうメー、  
 舞踊。

現在ニューヨークでアメリカを中心に活動中。

2002/2003年 Gallery 1999New York、2005年 Gallery  
 LImageIDパリ、2014年 the Anderson Gallery, 1996 Gallery (リ  
 ベージュ), A.I.S., Gallery (ニューヨーク)、2015年 Silverline Art  
 Londonなどが舞台に展示会を開催。現在はロンドンのGalerie



## Appendix 6: Installation shots of exhibitions



Fig.1 2016 *Showcase*





Fig.2 *Self portrait*, photolithographs, soft ground etching, monotypes on paper, 70 x50 cm each.



Fig.3 Showcase 2016 *untitled*, monotype, soft ground etching, acrylic on packing paper and Hahnemühle paper, 160 x 50 cm.



Fig.4 Showcase 2016, untitled, monotype, collage, soft ground etching, tape, on packing paper, 160 x 80 cm.



Fig.5 Showcase 2016, monotype, collage, soft ground etching on Hahnemühle paper.



Fig. 6 Main Building, Centre D'Art Marnay Artist Centre artist residency, Marnay-Sur-Seine, France, July 2016.





Fig.7 Collages, CAMAC Open Studios



Fig. 8 Painted photograph, CAMAC Open Studios



Fig. 9 Painted photograph, CAMAC Open Studios



Fig. 10 *Stanze*, 2016, untitled, installation of collages.

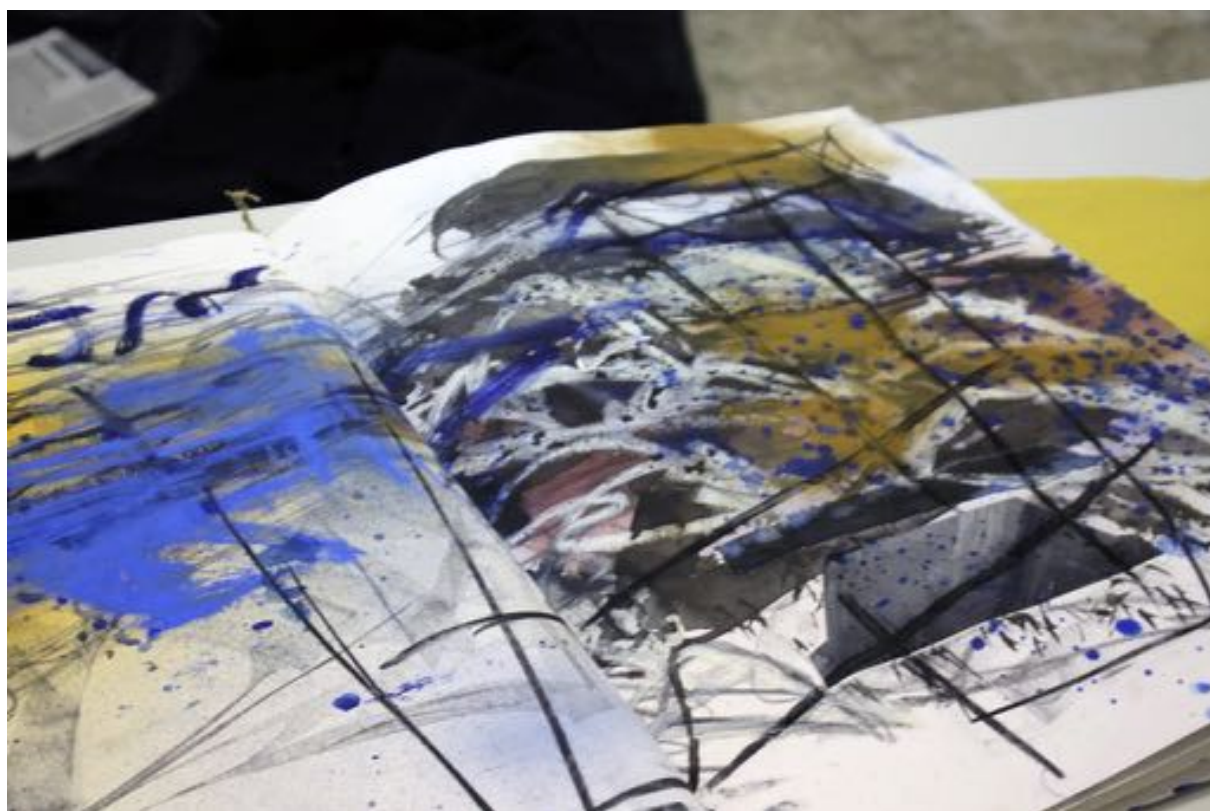


Fig. 11 *Untitled*, Artist's book, acrylic, charcoal, pastel on paper, 50 x 70 cm (when open).



Fig. 12 Detail installation, artist book on FBI fingerprint cards, 30 x 40 cm, monotype, collage on Hahnemüle paper, 113 x 70 cm.

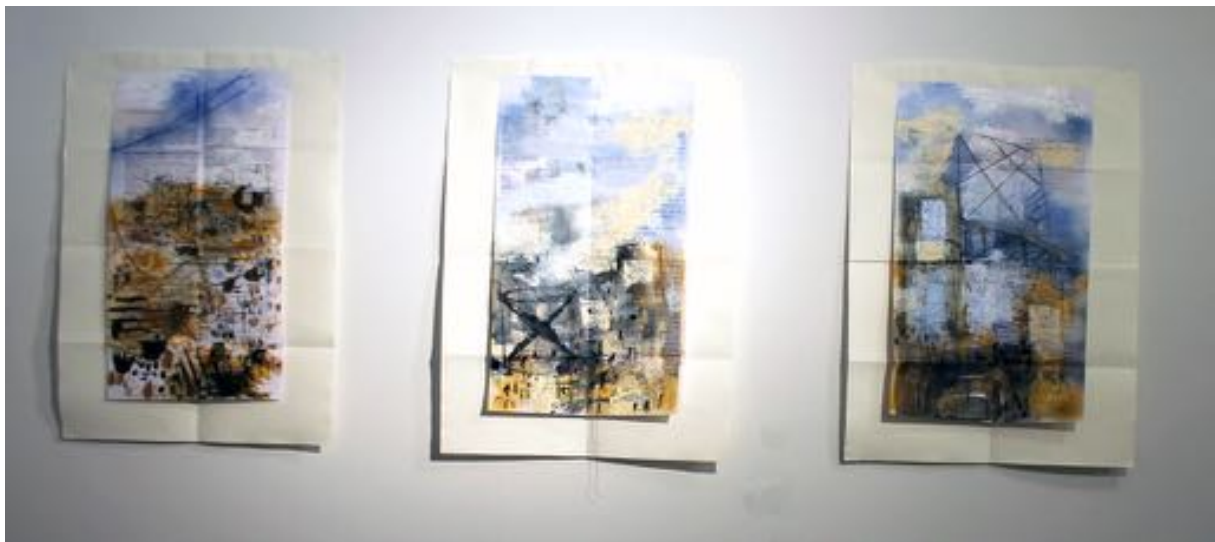


Fig. 13 *Clandestina, Untitled*, Folded paintings on paper, acrylic, charcoal, string, collage Italian citizenship law text.





Fig.14 From *Clandestina*, above detail, *Untitled*, acrylic on travel brochure, 20 x 100 cm.

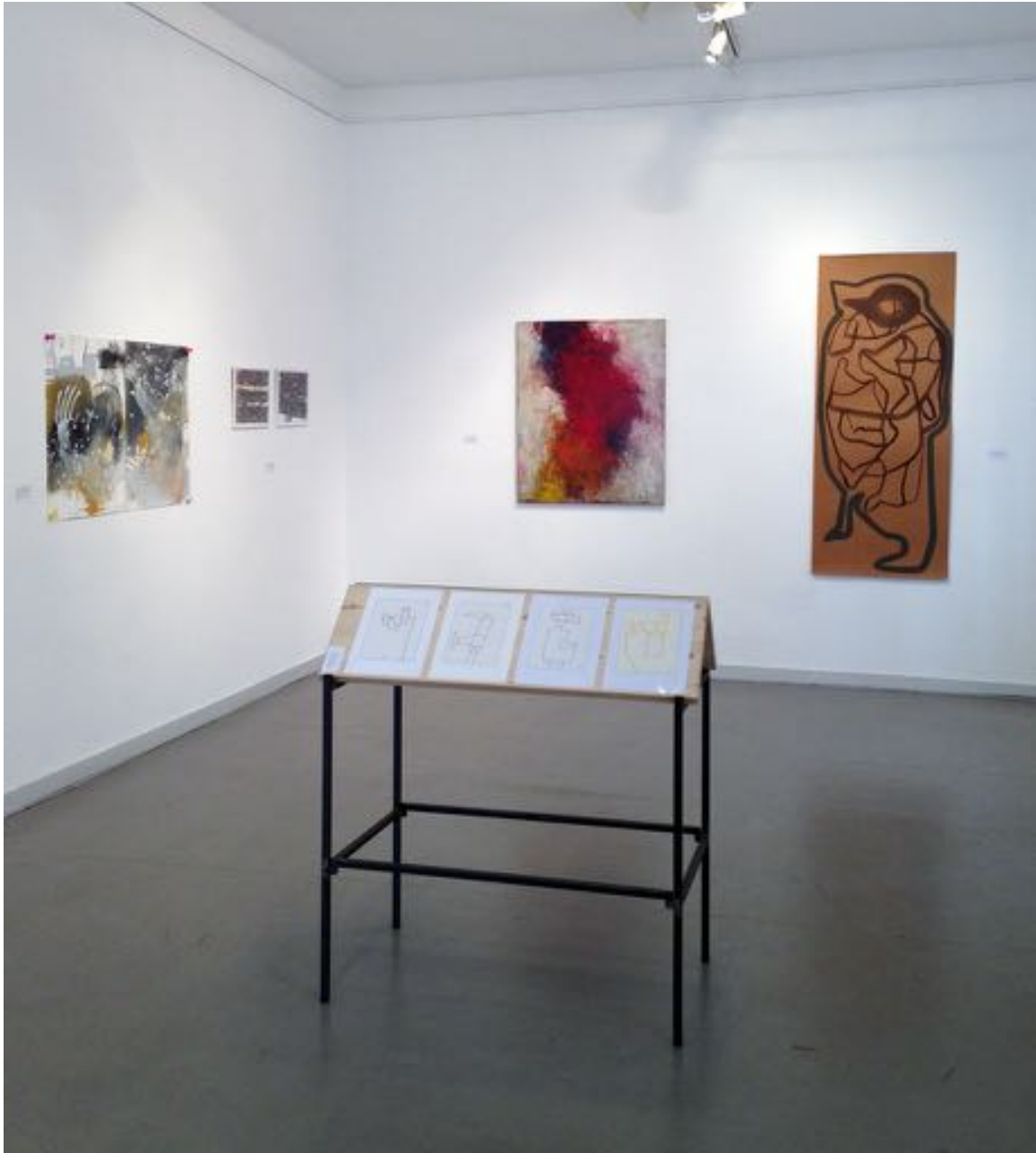


Fig.15 *A Titolo d'Ingresso*, first work on left, untitled, Oil on paper, 70 x 120 cm.



Fig. 16 *Showcase 2017 UEL*, installation



Fig. 17 *Showcase 2017 UEL*, installation.



Fig. 18 *Untitled*, oil, charcoal on canvas, 160 x 120 cm.



Fig.19 *Untitled, oil on canvas, 160 x 120 cm*





Fig.20 *Showcase 2017 UEL, installation.*



Fig. 21 Private View, Solo Exhibition Private View, Spazio Arte.

## Viva Exhibition

### Exhibition Space 1

1. *Same corner each day*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018
2. *No nation, no border*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018
3. *From Syria*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018
4. *Dopo/Later*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018
5. *Hope for*, oil, oil bar, 115 x 80 cm, 201
6. *Seeking Abundance*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018

### Exhibition Space 2

7. *Snow in June, Frejus*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018
8. *Biding time*, oil, oil bar, charcoal on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018
9. *Pathway*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 250 x 120 cm, 2017
10. *Long Road*, oil, oil bar, charcoal on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018
11. *Sitting Tight*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018

### Exhibition Space 3

12. *Crossing*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x 120 cm, 2018
13. *One bowl of rice*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018
14. *Calciatore/Footballer*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018
15. *Hero*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x 120 cm, 2018
16. *Without a roof*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x 120 cm, 2018

## Exhibition Space 1











*Same corner each day*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018



*No nation, no border*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018



*From Syria*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018



*Dopo/Later*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 120 x 160 cm, 2018



*Seeking abundance*, oil, oil bar, 160 x 120 cm, 2018



*Hope for*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 115 cm, 2018



Exhibition Spaces 1. and 2.



Exhibition Space 2.





*Snow in June, Frejus*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018



*Biding time*, oil, oil bar, charcoal on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018



*Pathway*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 250 x 120 cm, 2017



*Long Road*, oil, oil bar, charcoal on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018



*Sitting Tight*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018

Exhibition Space 3.









*Crossing*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x 120 cm, 2018



*One bowl of rice*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018



*Calciatore/Footballer*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, 2018



*Hero*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x 120 cm, 2018



*Without a roof*, oil, oil bar on canvas, 160 x120 cm, 2018