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ARTICLE

**THE ARCHIVE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE AGAINST THE LOSS OF COLLECTIVE HISTORICAL MEMORY**

Interview with Bridget Baker by Anna Santomauro

A conversation with Bridget Baker to explore the work *The Remains of the Father*, exhibited at MAMbo and curated by Elisa Del Prete, in which the South African artist investigates the Italian colonial past and its architectural and social impact in Eritrea



*The Remains of the Father.* Courtesy l'artista e Nosadella.due, Bologna. Foto Alessandro Trapezio.

AS: *In my opinion, every investigation a researcher carries out is made through a particular lens, which can be more or less visible: our own experience and cultural background. How do you relate your own identity to the research that you develop as an artist?*

BB: I do implicate my own narrative within the speculative research that I conduct, I suppose to position myself as presenting, "reading" research rather than writing it. I am interested in the display of the research as a way of reading the research without quite entering into understanding it, allowing the documents of research to be themselves rather than offering a definitive reading of them. I think there is a lot of my own narrative and way of seeing involved in this performative system of working, allowing the fallibility and capacity of the "object of research" to speak for itself/themselves, or perhaps not to speak. This is why the protagonist in *The Remains of the Father* arrives in the room to be amidst the visual text. She is not finite in her action whilst she is there, merely conducting herself with her work, and being open to being amidst the visual text, which unfolds into a discourse just because she is in the midst of it. I am interested in the relational experiences that occur by simply being essentially inside the research in a way that renders it completely speculative and anonymous, as if it was always there, though we have not looked or read it in the way that we do in that moment. This post-colonial positioning is a direct response and reaction to my own experience of growing up in apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 80s and receiving my education at a time when colonial and hegemonic knowledge systems were set firmly in place.

AS: *What led you to investigate the Italian colonial past?*

BB: For quite some years now I have been considering the influences of colonialism within African countries and objects of architecture as pre-eminent examples of colonial influence and effect. I became interested in recalling the Eurocentric gaze on Africa by fabricating aspects of the modernist systems, through film and performance, to return the gaze back on itself. The entry point into a research phase about the Italian colonial past in Africa for me was triggered by the incredible examples of "futurist" modernist architecture in Asmara, especially the Fiat Tagliero Building that Giuseppe Pettazzi designed for the capital of Eritrea in 1938, with its cantilevered arms it looks like a plane or space ship about to lift-off. Other buildings perhaps less dynamic but full of movement like moving trains and ships that are apartment blocks add to the plethora of buildings constructed during the Italian colonial period in Eritrea and are clearly public cultural signifiers of extra-ordinary "otherness". I became intrigued by these objects created as visual systems of otherness that engender dominance, a reminder of similar systems present in apartheid South Africa, which we still struggle with in South Africa today. After initial discussions with Elisa Del Prete director at Nosadella.due in Bologna I was also really surprised to understand that the period of Italian colonialism in Africa is not taught in the contemporary history curriculum in Italian schools. This lack of legitimizing a certain past in history and thereby "forgetting" that it took place has direct correlation with the inherent post-colonial concerns I have as an art practitioner. So I guess I was hooked then by the similarity, considering the legacy of forgetting in my own country even after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had happened, there was some kind of fortitude to forget that persisted then and now in our history. The desire to forget through restraining memory and un-learning it through the school system seems to be embroidered into the Italian and South African social psyche in terms of their and our contemporary history.

AS: *Could you explain your approach towards the use of the archive and documentary in your research and in The Remains of the Father?*

BB: My approach to most of my work is speculative. I don't have an outcome in mind when I start research, for me this process is migratory but as I am intrigued by micro-and marginalized narratives, I conduct research through meeting people, having conversations, as well as reading material within the archive (or in the case with much of the Italian material, rely on the language translation process). In all of this I also strongly rely on the visual to trigger ideas.

When I first started researching for *The Remains of the Father*, I watched a handful of Italian war films made in Africa such as *Squadriglia bianca* and *Bengasi Anno '41* but the dramatic war narratives were contrived to remove any discourse with place and humanity.

At the same time I was visiting and meeting Eritreans from the communities in Milan, Rome and Bologna with questions about narratives about Italian rule in Eritrea and whether I could have access to visual archives they might have brought from Eritrea when settling in Italy. In most cases the archives kept within the Eritrean community are oral or "living archives", again a migratory form of maintaining traditions through conversation, and lived experience within communities.

Spending an exhaustive period trying to access documents from non-western sources on the Italian past in Eritrea, Elisa and I stumbled across the Giovanni Ellero archive held in the History Department at the University of Bologna after reading some sources on the Internet and ethnographic source books of letters kept by this Italian administrator while he lived in Eritrea and Ethiopia (mostly written by Irma Taddia and Gianni Dore). Elisa and I were able to have access to all



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of these original documents that have mostly not been published. I became quite intrigued by Giovanni's approach to keeping a study of almost every daily activity of the Eritrean society: learning the language, collating migratory farming behaviour through mapmaking, recording conversations about relationship laws and marriage rites, listing proverbs and keeping family seals which would have been for bureaucratic purposes. His approach remained visual which drew me in, he would draw a gestural line which indicated a road and alongside was pencilled the long line of a family tree. Within Giovanni Ellero's archive we discovered much of his own desire to educate the Italian community on alternate possibilities of design and architecture that he considered relevant to establish as "colonial architecture". These discoveries need to be made, no matter how insignificant and singular, they give voice to the singular narrative, as well as highlight the desire of connection with a past that remains part of a present.

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