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.

**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:** 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 interest.

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 *Il reggimento Assiro* but the dramatic war narratives were continued 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 exhaust period trying to access documents from non-western sources on the Italian past in Eritrea. Elisa and I stumbled across the Giovanni Ellen archive held in the History Department at the University of Bologna after reading some sources on the Internet and then spoke with an Italian archivist who let us have access to all the Eritrean sources. This was mostly written in Italian and Eritrean Arabic.

**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, during the 1970s and 80s and receiving my education at a time when colonial and hegemonic knowledge systems were set firmly in place.

The Remains of the Father. Courtesy Fattorini e Nossaletta due, Bologna. Foto Alessandro Tropsha

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

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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.