

Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art.

Leonardo da Vinci

*The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another
purposively, to cause vibrations in the soul.*

Wassily Kandinsky

Hand Land is an exhibition devoted to the condition of the artist and the process by which his/her identity is embedded in material through “hand work.” Rooted in the words of curator Sharon Hecker that “beauty is the discovery of a new point of view on a work of art,” *Hand Land* seeks to initiate discussion of the *corpus* of a work of art and its visual metamorphosis.

The installation of this exhibition of five international artists invites the spectator on a timeless journey whereby touch becomes a third eye and manual skill reveals the artist’s id.

Work as medium

Gillian Brett (Paris, 1990) is a French artist, winner of the *Xiaomi HyperCharge Prize* at the last edition of Artissima 2021, “whose research best transmits the charge that innovation and culture are able to give to contemporary society and how art can be the starting point to relaunch a transformation process.”¹ She chooses to use technological waste as material for her sculptures and installations, created from electrical components, resin, Plexiglas, steel, aluminium, engines, and damaged or broken screens, which are recycled to give them a new identity. The charm we find in the screen of *E 170 Sc (After Hubble)* (2020) or observing the sculpture *Bionic Leaf* (2021) is delicate and in conflict with the raw material. The works in the series *Smart Food: better for you and the planet* (2020), are a metaphor of contemporary blindness. The poetry is recognised through a construction in the now of the eternal universe, (re)birth, and thus the (re)identification of itself inside the consumer society which is critically rethought and reread.

Work as case history

Ayobola Kekere-Ekun (Lagos, 1993) is a Nigerian artist who mainly works with the *quilling* technique, whereby strips of paper are individually modelled to create shapes, like a three-dimensional display of lines, producing inlets of light and shade. The making process causes and pushes the search for oneself into a *multi-layer* mode, as if the work was a collection of experiences, a ritual, an exorcism of one’s identity through surrounding societies and cultures. According to the artist, her pictures are “attempts at revealing the connections between *oneself and identity* and the way they interface with individual and collective memory.” Kekere-Ekun’s works are remarkable for their perfect finish and the tactile nature, which bears witness to a propensity for visually stimulating work. We see the construction of a new objectivity in discussion between the imaginary and real in the diptych *Founding members* (2022); the revelation that we ourselves are observers and judges of our subconscious, our half-open being, half-closed to both situations, existing and surreal. Recalling Umberto Eco’s thought, that “art always arises from a historical context, it reflects it and promotes its evolution,”² this diptych gains both a psychological and socio-cultural connotation at the same time. Its conceptual reflection highlights a discussion between traditions and contemporaneity, both within Nigerian culture and globally, asking questions about stratification/union and personal/collective identity as the main questions of her work.

¹ Description of the Nomination for the *Xiaomi HyperCharge Prize*.

² Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 1962/2006 RCS Libri S.p.A. Bompiani.

Work as disturbance

Olivia Parkes (1989) is an Anglo-American artist who lives and works in Berlin, using painting to explore how the media conditions our perception of both history and daily life. Social identity is the subject of deep analysis through frames on cloth-lined board that, in some way, recall the silent cinema, as well as American tabloids, resembling a collage of contemporary visual culture. Parkes's pictures on show (all dated 2020) are a narration created by stop motions, full of feeling and expressiveness. Northern European influences can be perceived in *Can't find the words* while *Hand Land*, which lends the exhibition its title, has a surrealist character and is a metaphor for life constantly controlled by another. Whether it's a superior force or media's vice, each of us has to accept the situation, overcoming the conflicts. The predominant colour is an intense blue which contrasts with the disorder and social chaos and invites introspection (in the theory of colour, blue is the symbol of the infinite, faith and peace), designating a stable, tension-free relationship, (re)constructing a relationship between the individual and the collective every time.

Work as narrative thread

In the stitched pictures of **Harriet Riddell** (UK, 1990), all dated 2021, the yarn becomes the ideal tool to trace the line of cultural legacies in the present. Riddell is a young British artist who uses the sewing machine as a tool to create narrations on canvases, thus tracing Ariadne's thread to unite solid craft tradition with the fragility of the post-pandemic *hic et nunc*. It is as though a fragmentary identity were "(re)sewn" with salvaged fabric, experienced and transformed by the details of daily life. Thus, *Stay at home*, showing a woman in the middle of her home, disproportionate relative to her house, comprises bright red colours that symbolise a cry of non-acceptance of the present: wherein our basic human freedoms (like free movement) are denied to us. At the same time, the picture is also a symbol, a sort of manifesto of a woman's civil and professional rights, at the centre of a chauvinist world, where there is still an invisible line that divides two worlds, and crossing which is often strongly discouraged. The result is *Stand behind the yellow line*.

Work as prism

MJ Torrecampo (Philippines, 1992), is a Filipino artist who lives and works in Florida, and shares the choice of the (re)construction and (re)working of reality, with a rational and sociological analysis, which often has a political connotation, with all the other artists in the show. As Jacques Derrida stated, "The essence of a culture is not to be identical to itself. Not that it doesn't have identity but that it can't be identified, say "I" or "we", that it can take the form of the subject only in the non-identity to itself or, if you prefer, the difference with itself."³ The variety of cultural matrices that Torrecampo draws on can be traced at all levels of her artistic processing. We see reflection on her culture, both her original and adopted ones, in the acrylics on paper (all dated 2020). In *Under The influence of*, each element of society is overloaded by threads of information. In *Quiet Steps*, we see the symbolic presence of another id, whose voice is only heard at night.

The artists chosen for *Hand Land* are all young women at the beginning of their careers, yet all internationally recognised. Their research is based on personal mythologies, and their work constructed through a conceptual reworking of the topic of identity, analysed from different points of view, through various techniques and materials. Thus, the five artists could enrol in the *artist as ethnographer*⁴ sector as they analyse and describe the most topical situations, sending messages via their works, through the reminiscence of ideas and the act of knowing.

Medium, case history, disturbance, narrative thread and prism are five substantial elements that indicate a work of art as such. The expressive strength is perhaps absolutely the unique means, the real *hand work* without which there wouldn't be the foundations for the work, just as no real *being an artist*.

Tatiana Martyanova

³ Jacques Derrida, *Oggi L'Europa*, Garzanti, Milano, 1991.

⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (1996).