

BAERTGALLERY 2441 HUNTER STREET LOS ANGELES CA 90021
+1 213 537 0737 INFO@BAERTGALLERY.COM

ArtReview

Mike Watson, "BLACK ON WHITE?", Art Review (September, 2015), print [ill.]

BLACK ON WHITE? Being a report on the hardships suffered by those IMMIGRANTS seeking refuge and betterment in Italy; and the Italian artworld's tentative response to matters of IMMIGRATION, RACE and IDENTITY



Jebila Okongwu, *The Economics of Reality is my Nationality*, 2015,
banana boxes, fishing line, polystyrene foam, glue, dimensions variable.
Courtesy the artist

With 50,000 people reportedly escorted to safety from the Mediterranean to the shores of Italy so far this year, there is a coincidence shift in demographics visible on the streets of Rome. This is just the figure for people who have taken that particular route. Many more are clearly entering Italy on a continuous basis via other coastlines and borders, desperate for work and final stability: an estimated 150,000 illegal immigrants per year.

Year on year for the seven years that I have lived here it has been apparent that illegal immigration is increasing exponentially, due in part to increasingly intolerable living conditions in Central and North Africa and the Middle East. This manifests most visibly in an increase in homelessness emanating out from Termini, Rome's central station, down towards Via

Merulana and the Parco del Colle Oppio, situated on one of the famous seven hills upon which Rome was built. At times, small clusters of tents appear on pavements, grass verges and in parks and lay-bys. This phenomenon goes unreported in the local and national press, as does the often-sudden disappearance of these small communities, which are presumably moved on, and in some cases, detained by the forces of law and order.

Some unfortunate immigrants find themselves processed in Rome's Center of Immigration and Expulsion (or CIE), situated in Ponte Galeria, a district on the city's periphery, heading towards the beach of Ostia. Dubbed the Italian Guantanamo by its critics, Ponte Galeria CIE is privately run and said to maintain its cells and facilities in appalling sanitary conditions, according to the few journalists who have been allowed to enter. The poor circumstances would appear unjustifiable in light of the fact that the facilities are managed by GEPSA (Gestione Penitenziari E Servizi Ausiliari Services), who are themselves a subsidiary of Cofely, an energy management company in turn controlled by Engi, a French multinational energy giant with an annual revenue of just under €75 billion. While recent changes in the law have reduced the maximum period of detention in a CIE to three months, the conditions remain unbearable, with insufficient supplies of basics such as soap and toilet paper, according to the few journalists who have been able to enter. On the night of 4—5 July, despair led to a revolt in which a group of male inmates burned mattresses and tried unsuccessfully to force open the gates of the detention complex.

From the safety and distance of the artworld, it is hard to relate to the conditions experienced by Italy's most impoverished inhabitants, who are invariably immigrants. One reason for this is the lack of representation of the immigrant population in cultural circles. Other than one or two relatively privileged 'expats', the artworld here is overwhelmingly Italian and middle-to-upper class. This, though, is surely no reason to ignore the problematic issues of immigration and racial identity in Italy. With these in mind, the American Academy in Rome held the group show *Nero su Bianco* from 26 May to 19 July of this year.

The 26 exhibiting artists responded to the notion of race with a strong sociopolitical intent that reflects the importance of racial identity in the future of Italy. The exhibition was divided into five themes – 'Echoes of Antiquity an Italian History', 'The Colonial Legacy', 'African Americans and Italy', 'Immigration/Integration' and 'Persistent Stereotypes' – and aimed to 'pave the way' for art institutions, and Italy itself, 'to be more inclusive and diverse laboratories for an ever-changing world', as expressed by the academy's arts director Peter Benson Miller in his introductory catalogue text. Of the work on display, *The Economics of Reality is my Nationality* (2015) stood out for its forthrightness. The work by Jebila Okongwu, a Rome-based UK-born artist of Australian and Nigerian parents, features banana boxes folded into the form of oversized bananas, displayed at the foot of a marble Greek torso in the academy's entrance. This play on colonial trade networks and racial stereotypes sits uneasily among the opulence of the academy (as would be true if it had been displayed in the British School of Rome or the nearby Spanish Academy). At the same time the work and the exhibition itself indicate the importance of starting the difficult discussion on race and cultural identity somewhere. But ultimately, the real value of the show will depend on whether it fosters further channels to continue the conversation with a diverse public.