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Photography between Desire and Disillusionment

West African Studio Portraiture, Diaspora, and Italy in the Work of Silvia Rosi

Introduction: “To Visualize Representations of Black Subjects inside the Territory of Italy”

Only after leaving her native Italy, where she was born and raised, did Italian-Togolese artist Silvia Rosi (b. 1992, Scandiano, Reggio Emilia) begin making work about her family’s past and their arrival on the peninsula. In her practice, which is dedicated to photography and video, at times accompanied by textual elements, we can say that Rosi pictures – meaning she both imagines and creates images of – her West African parents (as well as archetypal figures of their broad association) before and after their migration in the late 1980s from Togo to Italy, all through the practice of self-portraiture.¹ Paradigmatic of this work is her *Encounter* series (2019–20), in which Rosi stages photographic portraits of herself in the space of the studio, posing as her parents. As these performed and embodied subjects, she holds objects and uses gestures, such as head-carrying, that cue us to cultural contexts and to experiences associated with her parents’ migration, and with the artist’s own heritage and diasporic position in turn.

In *Self-Portrait as My Mother in School Uniform* (2019), for example, Rosi balances tiny bundles of wood (used for teeth-brushing in West Africa), like those sold by her mother as a young girl in a Lomé market, the caption tells us, on a small tray on her head, while she looks at the camera and snaps the picture [fig. 1]. In *Self-Portrait as My Father* of the same year, we see Rosi-as-her-father, in business dress, jacket and tie, glasses on and books balanced on his head – all signs of his erudition. He is surrounded by scarlet-red quartets of plump tomatoes, neatly stacked in equally spaced pyramidal groups on the floor and step of the draped studio set [fig. 2]. The caption reads, and repeats: “He was an educated man from a good Togolaise family. He arrived in Italy with a few clothes, some books and the dream of finding a good job. A few weeks later he was picking up tomatoes in a field for a few cents a box.”

In other works, language, props and formal choices, as in the artist’s nods to analog photography, cue us to the time-period of Rosi’s parents’ emigration and immigration and to circulation of such subjects and images. Consider the recent series, *Disintegrata* (Disintegrated, 2024), in which Rosi also appears; its title, in the feminine singular form, points to the artist’s autobiographic

connection to diaspora and to her experience in her native country as a woman whose racialization announces her not only as having heritage from elsewhere, but as, contrary to fact, being exclusively from elsewhere. The title, in Italian, evokes two meanings: first, “disintegrated” as in “pulverized,” and second, “disintegrated” as in “not integrated” or “out of place” socially, typically put as *non integrata*. In these works, we see Rosi pose as a woman at a salon (*Disintegrata dal parrucchiere*), who turns to look at us while her hair sets under a vintage hooded dryer; as a 1970s girl on-the-go (*Disintegrata in bici*), her glance over her shoulder suggests, in positive and negative prints, Chelsea boots and bell bottoms on, bike in tow [fig. 3]. In another work (*Disintegrata che aspetta*), she is a young woman turned away from us, seemingly waiting for a ride, with two hand-carry valises at her feet [fig. 4]. In two other works, both black-and-white, one a triptych, Rosi poses as Italian and Togolese brides, respectively, distinguished by nationality through the artworks’ titles. The subjects are visually distinguished as “European” and “African” by differences in dress, a distinction that Rosi complicates with the constant of her own body [fig. 5; fig. 6]. The images thereby visually refute the typically concomitant divisor of race as such – that construction of difference long (and frequently) used, especially in the history of photography, to construct and separate “West” from “non-West,” not to mention “Italian” from foreign identity, since state formation with the Risorgimento. Sometimes spliced into polyptych formats or across positive and negative iterations, the works underscore the mobility, temporality, and transformation of photography as medium, which make it well-disposed to artistic contemplations on migration. The resulting images narrate, directly (by content) or indirectly (by form), Rosi’s family’s personal experience of migration to Italy, and her connection to it. The images are ultimately depictions of her through her connection to her family’s history and to the experience of a self-consciously racialized and diasporic life in her native Italy.² In these images and others, Rosi creates a family album and diasporic archive, at once real and imaginary. In the artist’s conceptualization of her practice, her work has been most inspired by her own family photo albums of the 1980s and 1990s (a point underscored by one work from *Disintegrata* in which she poses with family photos).³ These images include those taken in commercial portrait photography studios in Lomé, which she scans and enlarges, to enable her to study the small prints more carefully.⁴ They also include those taken of her family in Italy. In creating such an archive, she visualizes, and arguably telegraphs an effort to make common, images of Black people in Italy, never regularly seen by the artist growing up. As the artist has put it:

La mia pratica artistica inizia a partire della fotografia. Mi esprimo attraverso l'autoritratto, il video, e il testo, e utilizzo immagini che appartengono a un

archivio familiare – in particolare, immagini che ritraggono membri della mia famiglia, nel paesaggio italiano, quindi vanno a visualizzare una rappresentazione di soggetti neri all'interno del territorio italiano.⁵

Indeed, in video and photographs in *Disintegrata*, Rosi pictured (and re-pictured, as some videos run on a constant loop), herself and her mother in green, grassy hillsides, evoking the famed *colline* of her home region of Reggio Emilia. For Rosi, the practice counters a “certain absence” – that is, of Black bodies – in open landscape, a spatial trope often captured in nineteenth-century Romantic paintings. They also capture an absence of belonging sensed by Black people, namely her mother, in such environs despite their proximity to home.⁶ Additionally, and importantly for Rosi, her practice, which involves what she views as the privilege of presenting herself as others, gives her an experience of freedom that she has not experienced in her native country, where people might assign a role to her based on her race: the identity of migrant.⁷ Photography in this regard – through which the artist visualizes a representation of Black subjects in Italy – a key point for this essay – is an act of wish fulfillment. It homes in on the importance of visual representation and its cultural politics in relation to constructions of (and potentially, changes to) national identity and belonging.

Potential Narratives: The Family Album, Studio Portrait Photography, and Figuration in African-Diasporic and Italian Artistic Practice

Rosi's photographs intersect with numerous art historical narratives, some better known than others. First might be the use of the family photograph and related album, both imagined and readymade. The family photograph has long been a site of critical attention for contemporary African and African diaspora artists, undergoing what American artist and art historian Deborah Willis, writing in her canonical *Picturing Us* of the mid-1990s, noted was a “sharp increase” in then-recent years⁸ [in this history, we might think, for example, of Santu Mofokeng in South Africa (*The Black Photo Album: Look at Me, 1890–1950*); Zineb Sedira in Algeria, France, and England (see *Mother Tongue*, 2002); Carrie Mae Weems' *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–82), Lorraine O'Grady, and more recently LaToya Ruby Frazier in the U.S.; and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, as in her *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998), in the Caribbean]. This phenomenon is also associated with what the late Nigerian curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor framed as a broader phenomenon of “archive fever” in contemporary art. Building on Jacques Derrida's theorization of the *mal d'archive*, a conservational drive toward classification that counters the

threat of being forgotten, Enwezor theorized that the archive in contemporary art functions as “new kind of interpretive structure, as the place to examine collective memory,” even as it is associated with structures of power that exclude some histories.⁹ To that end, such practices proliferated with the postcolonial turn and identitarian concerns of art and artistic movements of the 1980s, in an increasingly globalized world, and with the generational expansion of diasporic populations, some of whom migrated to former métropoles following decolonization, others of whom, like Rosi, were born and raised in the diaspora.

The stakes of using the photo album for Black and African-descendent artists in Italy (who are often regarded racially as *soggetti neri*, whether they identify as such) are particularly fraught given legacies from colonial-era (both liberal and Fascist) mass culture. Advertisements and other print media depicted Black Africans (and Jewish people, among others), in journals such as *La difesa della razza* (1938–43), through a gross primitivist lens. Such images were integral to the project of whitening Italians for the sake of homogenizing national identity and competing with other European nations and imperial powers. In the postwar decades following the establishment of the Italian Republic and Constitution of 1948 and its promise of equality, racism nevertheless persisted, as did a long-inscribed “racial/racist imaginary,” as Silvana Patriarca has written, which excluded biracial and mixed-race Italians from national identity. This imaginary persisted in articulations of racial hierarchies in post-fascist Italian mass culture, as in cinema and television (such as *Drive In* and *Indietro tutta!*) of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that exoticized Black actors’ bodies for white viewers, and orientalized and exoticized “femminilità non-bianca.”¹⁰ Even in films where race was dismissed by the filmmaker as of relevance to the story, citing Roman inclusion, for example, of racial diversity, representation of the non-white female body could only occur, some have argued, through discursive erasure of race. This is to say, as Patriarca has also argued, that Italians with darker skin are invisible; they are “una rappresentazione impossibile.”¹¹ Building on Patriarca’s point, it is not that representations of Black Italians are impossible, but that *visual apprehension* of representations of Black Italians as such is impossible through a national lens of perception. If race is perceived to mark the Italian body (perhaps positioned as such through iconography), the subject cannot be Italian. Instead, Black bodies have been deployed in spectacular, anthropological ways, even in the contemporary context, as Willis noted in her discussion of contemporary Italian advertising, as in Oliviero Toscani’s controversial “Breastfeeding” Benetton ad of the late 1980s, in which a white baby was breastfed by a Black woman (whose head was cropped out of the image).¹² Countering these legacies, Rosi’s works also align with practices by

other Italian artists (some but not all of African descent), such as Alessandra Ferrini, Aida Silvestri, Binta Diaw, Adjie Dieye, collective Fare Ala, and filmmakers such as Simone Brioni (who also uses family photos), who have used photography as a means to critically investigate memory (both personal and collective), European-African (and often more specifically Italian-African) relations, and colonial histories and legacies, documented or not.¹³

Studio portrait photography is also connected to other histories of migration in Italy. Emigrant Italian populations in new homes, as far away as Australia, would send photographs to family in Italy; some photographers in Italy, as Giorgia Alù has demonstrated, would even photograph these family members holding such photographs as signs of connection between diaspora and home.¹⁴ In diasporic contexts, “Italian migrants construed the photographer’s studio as a place where they could assert control over their own visibility and its fabrication,” using the construction of an idealized self-image as a way to “reinforce their presence within the host society, while situating their bodies and desire in opposition to dominating strategies of control and representation.”¹⁵ Italy’s own cinematic and photographic history has been approached as an archive by artists Italian and otherwise, as in the work of Renée Green and Yara Piras.¹⁶ But the artistic use of the family photograph and album has been far more limited in postwar and contemporary Italian art. The role of portrait photography as a means of connecting family geographically separated by migration is shared terrain between Rosi and a few other Italian artists who have worked with photography in this vein, as in Mario Cresci’s *Ritratti reali* (1972) – a body of thirty triptychs connected by Ilaria Campioli to Rosi’s practice, and namely to her work *Disintegrata con Foto di Famiglia* (2024), in which Italian families, including emigrants who have returned home during Ferragosto, pose with family pictures.¹⁷

A second art historical narrative for Rosi’s work might position them as part of the recent history of Italian artists of African descent, including Jem Perucchini and Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, who have used figuration and its genres (such as realism, icon painting, and portraiture), to visualize and celebrate Black and multi-ethnic Italian identity, countering ongoing ethnocentric nationalism that has long positioned Italianness as both white and as racially unmarked.¹⁸ Other narratives still might position Rosi’s work in relation to genealogies of postmodernism. Much of her practice has been dedicated to photographing herself, in what we might call a deconstructionist model of self-portraiture, found in the work of Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, and Samuel Fosso, which destabilizes myths of originality, individual unitary authorship, and self-mastered, centered subjectivity conventionally telegraphed by the genre. But Rosi’s work notably departs from (and even counters) these artistic precedents by underscoring the significance of the

presence of the artist *as herself* in the staged tableaux of her images even as she is also playing someone else. She appears as a metonym for her own parents' pasts. These images, and their stakes, are personal.

A Foundational Visual Language, Underexamined: West African Studio Portrait Photography in Rosi's Work

Beyond these potential narratives, the genealogy that is perhaps most notable in Rosi's works is their demonstrative deployment of the genre and "visual language" of West African (meaning sub-Saharan West Africa) studio portrait photography, which developed in coastal and interior countries, most famously Senegal, Mali, and Ghana. Rosi draws upon formal, procedural, and iconographic tropes from the genre. It is arguably the works' primary art historical and cultural frame, the conceit around which they operate. Initially made familiar to her by the family photographs brought with her parents to Italy and seen by Rosi in Lomé, on holidays, West African portrait photography was made famous in art history through curatorial and commercial projects since the 1990s that championed the work of Malian photographers Seydou Keïta (the most famous of these photographers), Malick Sidibé, and others. Rosi's subjects (herself) are centered in the image field, in shallow spaces; she poses in highly staged, fixed stances.¹⁹ She often uses cloth backdrops (sometimes patterned, as in her ABC series of 2022) to create a *mise-en-scène*, as is typical of such images. She also uses props (historically, "modern" European objects, such as radios, wristwatches, clocks, pens, bicycles, motor scooters, as in this image by Keïta, that speak to subjects' cosmopolitanism and socioeconomic prosperity), which here, are a broader set of objects that function to different critical ends [fig. 7]. She uses dress (Western-style fashions and traditional West African garments, in West Africa worn by the subject for the occasion or provided by the photographer) and a studio set to stage aesthetically pleasing and often idealized portraits (as we all like portraits of ourselves to be), that speak to the prosperity (or not, as we will see in some of Rosi's images), cosmopolitanism, and modernity of the subject.²⁰

The history of this genre, both in development and reception, is also connected to the multigenerational temporality of Rosi's images. The phenomenon of Rosi's reference proliferated in sub-Saharan urban centers such as Dakar, Bamako, and Lomé (the artists' parents' hometown) in the 1940s, 1950s (at which point portrait photography was democratized and widely available), and 1960s, but has been on the Continent as long as photography itself (which is to say, nearly as long as photography has

existed).²¹ It came to international recognition by Western arts institutions in the 1990s when certain photographers, such as the aforementioned Keïta, the most famous from this history, and Sidibé, came to be celebrated in global art markets and institutions, and contemporary photographers, such as Samuel Fosso, working in this legacy, also came to international prominence. This shift was supported by postcolonial curators and art historians including Enwezor and others, in exhibitions such as *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996, curs. Claire Bell, Okwui Enwezor, Danielle Tilkin, and Octavio Zaya) and *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (International Center for Photography, New York, 2006, cur. Okwui Enwezor), both of which were accompanied by major catalogs.

Despite the visual prominence of the photographic genre in Rosi's work, not to mention the artist's personal connection to it, it is striking how little this conceit has been seriously examined in the nascent discourse on Rosi's work.²² Though the influence of West African studio portrait photography is always mentioned in any discussion of Rosi's work – it is a guaranteed note in discussions on the artist – little scholarly attention has been dedicated to what Rosi's work does with this history in her reflection on diaspora, or to what the stakes of its engagement might be for histories of art and critical artistic explorations of contemporary African-Italian experiences. This gap is only more surprising given the relatively large body of literature on West African studio portrait photography (in Africanist art history, growing in recent years) and increasing attention to Rosi's work by major institutions of contemporary art (as indicated by the acquisition of many of her recent works by the Museum of Modern Art in New York).²³ The absence of serious attention to this area of her work, and especially to the art histories it engages, in my view speaks to larger divisions in art history and in worldviews that have held Africanist (and African diasporic) art history away from broader discourses on modern and contemporary art that have historically centered on the West (and in many ways still do).

What discussions have been made are varied. They have pointed to Rosi's engagement of West African portrait photography as a means of articulating her connection to the region.²⁴ Curators in conversation with the artist have brought it up as a foil to colonial photography that fashioned a primitive racialized Other,²⁵ and that, as such a foil, allows for a "reappropriat[ion] of one's own image, a way to control a narrative," or to ascertain whether she looked at such images to determine how much conscious influence these works had on her practice.²⁶ Others have connected it to her conceptualization of the studio as a place to negotiate reality and identity, as it is in West Africa.²⁷ Others still have made astute, if brief comments, that

nevertheless gloss over the complicated work of these images; they argue, for example, that Rosi is “reinterpreting the classic West African studio portrait, by stripping it down to convey the lived realities of her family.”²⁸ To grapple with Rosi’s work, and its use of a recognizably modern African strategy as a means of family connection and as a means to critically reflect on experience within the racialized African diaspora in Italy, compels closer attention to the advent of African photography, alongside other sources, that she engages as she constructs self-portraits, family photographs, and other images.²⁹

One major reason for this oversight, it seems to me, and for the research problem with which this article concerns itself, is that curators and scholars who work on histories of Italian art or on modern and contemporary art – or both – seldom if ever also work in Africanist art history. Indeed, the latter is typically held apart from still Western-centered narratives of modern and contemporary art in art history and in arts institutions, even after the so-called “global turn.” The exception would be scholars and curators who work on modern and contemporary African art, but very few of these individuals also specialize in Italianist art history. A second major reason for this problem then can be attributed to the racialized construction and Aryanization of modern Italian identity and nationhood as white, dating from the Risorgimento through the Fascist racial laws – legacies of which persist in Italy today, amid renewed anti-Black violence and xenophobia and a resurgence of ethnocentric nationalism associated with far-right populism of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, and with the work of politicians such as Roberto Vannacci, the former general and so-called “fedele servitore della Patria” of the Lega and EU Parliament, whose best-selling books, widely criticized for homophobia, misogyny, and racism, urge for a re-Aryanization of Italy to restore a singular culture and ethnicity to the country.³⁰ These legacies also can be found in Italianist art history itself. Inattention to Black Italian artists by contemporary arts institutions has largely persisted, with some exceptions, namely in the curatorial work of Johanne Affricot, Justin Randolph Thompson, and Simone Frangi and in private arts foundations (Rosi at Collezione Maramotti, for example, and Binta Diaw at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, curated by Ilaria Bernardi), despite the growing prominence of Black Italian artists’ work extra-nationally, where they have more often found better support, and despite the region’s historical and increasing ethnic diversity today.

To do this kind of analysis, then, is to press against, as I have suggested above, an inattention to Africanist art history, and African-descendent people, within “Italianist” discourses. (The same might be said of the inattention within African diaspora art history to diasporas in Italy, particularly to modern and contemporary artists).³¹ This is especially the case for Italianist art history, a discourse that, as I have written elsewhere, remains behind the postcolonial

and transnational turns that have occurred in other areas of Italian cultural studies, including film and literature. This problem therefore also carries serious stakes for art history – itself fundamentally in many ways an Italianist discipline – and broader views of Italy and Italian art that would still position the country, Rosi's native country, and its culture as exclusively white.³² In response to this problem, I investigate Rosi's engagement of West African photography as a representational language through which she examines diasporic experience in Italy. Using formal, semiotic, and social art historical analysis, I consider these works, especially her *Encounter* and *Disintegrata* series, in relation to African and other art historical precedents, and in relation to the visual (and racialized) imaginaries around Italian nationhood, West African identity, and modernity in which they traffic, and to broader theories of photography.

Close Reading: *Self-Portrait as my Father*. An Image of National Destabilization and Diasporic Disillusionment

To elucidate the stakes of this problem, we might return to *Self Portrait as my Father* (see fig. 2). In West African studio portraiture, objects – whether belonging to the subject or selected from a group of props – are included as signs of the subject's modernity, cosmopolitanism, and economic plenitude (actual or imaginary). In this work, Rosi-as-her-father holds a tomato in one hand (lifted from a nearby cluster, destabilizing the visual and semiotic order of the arrangement and image), shutter-release in the other. A rogue tomato, out of place and on its own at bottom-left, echoes Rosi's gesture. It nags at us, out there on its own, leaving a trio of tomatoes to its right, now estranged from the other units; a sign of disorder, it tells us that things are not quite right. The text caption that accompanies the photograph confirms that the tomato in the image in this case, despite its history as a colonial import from America to Italy, is a sign of what Roland Barthes once called "Italianicity"; it calls to mind "a mass inventory" of signs and signifieds that connote all things that "could be Italian," that barbarously regulate that meaning and the ideology of its constitution.³³ In this work, the main prop – the one held up by the subject – the tomato, is markedly at odds with the visually relayed character of the subject; it is a dissonance that belies the out-of-placeness of Rosi's father (and Rosi) in Italy. Further underscoring this point is the tomato's simultaneous closeness to histories of migration in Italy, via histories of agricultural exploitation of immigrant workers. Consider the flashpoint cases of the murder of Jerry Essan Masslo, the Black South-African refugee who had spoken out against poor conditions for (mostly migrant) agricultural workers

in Villa Literno (in Campania), and again at Villa Literno in 1994, when clandestine housing for tomato field workers, mostly migrants, were burned by arson, catalyzing national attention to the exploitative conditions of migrant agricultural labor in Italy.³⁴ Headlines even then, however, further underscored the equivalence between phenotypic blackness and foreign identity in Italy: “Via i neri, causa dei nostri mali,” was one call from an anti-immigration protest in Caserta in the mid-1990s, which equated Black people with immigrants, to whom all ills were attributed.³⁵

Underscoring the picture’s self-conscious intermingling of disorder and order, pointing to the constructedness of Italian identity and to its potential disturbance, the caption and image also position that element and broader work (they direct us to it, in Barthes’ terms), as a sign of national destabilization and of diasporic disillusionment.³⁶ The appeal of Italy, the fruitful promise it offers, the photograph seems to say, is ready-at-hand – it is tangible, it exists – but it is unattainable for immigrants, especially those of color, who stand to destabilize *italianità*. This is especially the case for those who are racialized in Italy as “marked subjects,” following Mabel Wilson on Carrie Mae Weems’ own images of herself as a Black woman in Italy.³⁷ This status serves to perpetually jettison them and their families from national identity, even generations down the line. This tragic irony is underscored by the image’s composition. Migrants and immigrants, especially since the 1980s, have provided the low-waged labor that is foundational to Italy’s (and other countries’) agricultural industries.³⁸ The artist’s body in the work comprises the majority of the scene’s pyramidal composition; her gaze, confronting us as viewers, seems to tell us that her father’s realization continues in her own bodily experience of her own country.³⁹

Further analysis of the image, namely in relation to the artist’s use of West African studio portraiture, speaks to the complexity of the work’s navigation of diasporic life through this genre. Studio portraiture in West Africa is a language of idealized self-presentation, of transformation, as Manthia Diawara has described it; it visualizes how one wants to be seen. Photographers would be more commercially successful the better they were able to capture beautiful images of their subjects, to satisfy consumers’ “desire for an ideal self-image,” as Elizabeth Bigham has put it.⁴⁰ In conversation with Eric Otieno Sumba for *Griot Mag*, Rosi touched on this function of West African photography, noting that it allowed subjects to realize an idealized image of the self regardless of class.⁴¹ If we view Rosi’s use of West African portrait photography as therefore an engagement of a photographic language of idealized self-presentation, we can see that Rosi’s image also conjures the desire satisfied by such images, even if her image doesn’t satisfy it in turn. It is how, perhaps, its subject might want to be seen –

how her father (and she) wants to be seen, it might say, as Italian. Photography helps us see that the stakes here are *visual*. His belonging hinges, or fails at, visual constructions of difference that are maintained to preserve Italianness as white.

In this regard, Rosi's work in this case also traffics in Italian imaginaries – by which I mean, in images common in Italian mass media – in which case the image of a Black man, regardless of his education or class, regardless of his nationality, might not be so at odds with the tomato, precisely because he is read primarily as migrant (regardless of his citizenship). Sub-Saharan African migrants often work in tomato farming in Italy, as Rosi's father had to; mass-mediated images and stories of sub-Saharan men, who often provide such labor, are common in reports on the notoriously poor conditions of Italy's tomato districts. Images of such workers in the tomato "campi" or "ghetti" (or I might add, if less frequently, in burned clandestine migrant camps near them), are part of an "integral part of the iconography of international migration in Italy."⁴² (We might also add to this history racialized brand images that used highly racialized images of Black women, recalling my discussion of legacies of Fascist mass culture in contemporary Italian advertisements, with arrays of tomatoes to advertise tomato sauce and other goods).⁴³ The image therefore performs an assignation of the role of migrant on her father, as it points to the hostile ideology of Italianness that would never accept him – an experience Rosi has also had.

As this analysis demonstrates, Rosi takes a key artistic language of African modernity and turns it into both a visualization of Black subjects in Italy that simultaneously points to the *visual* exclusion of Black diasporic subjects from that country, and to the impossibility of that visualization through an Italian lens. As Steven Nelson has written, diaspora in this work functions as a counter-hegemonic challenge and mode of complication that works against "homogeneous fictions of nation, nationality, and citizenship."⁴⁴ In this function, African portrait photography is a politics that Rosi deploys, and re-deploys in her practice, to connect with family, memory, and to push against regulatory structures of power, including vision.

Dissonance and Disillusionment: Picturing African Diasporic Life in Italy

This argument is further supported by analysis of other images. Consider *Self Portrait as My Mother* (2019): a three-foot-square inkjet print of a photographic self-portrait by Rosi, staged in the draped set of a studio [fig. 8]. In the image, which is at-once self-portrait and portrait, we see Rosi, styled with a chic bob, posing as her mother in the late 1980s, shortly after she immigrated to Italy, the caption tells us. Dressed in smart low heels, black nylons, and a then-

fashionable teal-and-fuchsia floral-patterned dress (the shoulder pads of which cue us to the diegetic time-period of the image), Rosi stands against a cerulean-blue fabric backdrop and short platform that runs behind her in the otherwise empty studio set. On her head she balances, with apparent ease, a boombox with an antenna (a prop, like her dress, equally dated), which she holds lightly with her left hand. In the image, Rosi's (and via representation, her mother's) body is turned to one side, but she turns her head to face the viewer. Her somewhat-blank expression registers mild surprise or perhaps unpreparedness, an affect underscored compositionally by the slightly off-center position of the subject's body in the image field. The photograph, however, belies its own high degree of construction through the stage set of the studio, made visually prominent in bold blue monochrome, and by the presence of a shutter-release cable in the artist's hand. The latter signifies, for Rosi, the "intentionality in the act of self-portrayal."⁴⁵ Its cable runs down her leg, briefly coils in a pile, and leads out toward the camera (and us, as viewers) beyond the image field.

What the image constellates is a series of paradoxes, or better, dissonances: the image depicts at-once Rosi *and* her mother; it is at-once set in the 1980s and in the present day; and it is at-once, impossibly, candid and entirely controlled. But what strikes us perhaps upon further reflection is another dissonance still. As in *Self Portrait as My Father*, the object-as-prop and the accustomed way that the subject holds it are seemingly *incompatible* with the elegance of the figure. The image immediately reminds West African and many African diasporic viewers of West African portrait photography; its simultaneous prompting to and strangeness from those images points us to this incompatibility as the self-conscious distinction that Rosi makes in her tableaux. Rosi's images from those of her reference in West African photographic histories presents us with visual slant rhymes with critical messages.

As noted above, Rosi's selection of props, use of *mise-en-scène*, and centered composition in *Self Portrait as My Mother* recalls iconic images (and image types) in the history of West African studio portraiture – a history deeply connected to urban West African cosmopolitanism and the emergence of modernity in the region.⁴⁶ It reminds us especially, given the historicization of that genre, of Keïta. As Manthia Diawara has discussed, Këïta opened his studio in Bamako at the moment in which the city became a colonial center for France. Keïta helped urban residents achieve and express cosmopolitanism, and to realize, in idealized, beautiful portraits, their identity as Bamakois. (This idealized possibility is again what, per the artist, Rosi likes most about West African studio portrait photography).⁴⁷ Keïta's *Untitled (Man leaning on radio)*, from the mid-1950s, features a man in a jacket, collared shirt with wide lapels,

cuffed trousers, and leather dress shoes – as in other images by Keïta, he poses with objects, in front of a patterned-cloth backdrop that hangs closely behind him (see **fig. 7**). He looks straight ahead at the camera, even as he tunes a radio that sits on a small draped table to his side. A clock, another sign of prosperity, rests on top of the radio. The strange (and clearly posed) conflation of his interaction with an object and his attunement to the viewer is echoed in Rosi's balancing of the stereo and turn to face us.

In Rosi's image, however, the boombox, placed on the head of the elegant woman, is pointedly strange. The balanced object and its subject instead telegraph feminine physical capability and skill that the subject must have gleaned, the image implies, through habitual practice – even as that ability seems at odds with other signs of class in the image. Indeed, for the artist, this is an act of labor and ingenuity that recalls a frequent practice of women in various parts of the world. She observed it in an old photograph of her mother in Togo and in person, when visiting Lome's Assigame market, where her mother worked at a young age (see **fig. 1**).⁴⁸ Even if the gesture is out of place in the context of a studio portrait, here (and elsewhere in Rosi's work) it is presented, encoded even, as an iconographic sign of lost (and also African) knowledge, if perhaps initially unknown as such to some of the work's audiences.

For Rosi, posing as her mother (or father, as in other images in the series) is not performance, as her work has sometimes been described, but rather “an act of empathy, a way to put myself in their shoes and understand their stories.”⁴⁹ This is “an act of remembering”: a mnemonic practice, to recall, learn, and investigate not only her family history but her own identity and origins connected to it. As such a practice, Rosi's portrait photography facilitates the acquisition of would-be familiar skills, had she grown up in West Africa, that were lost (to her) as a result of migration by her parents to Europe.⁵⁰

Beyond the image, Rosi's story of personal identity, family, and African diasporic experience in Italy is told through a rectangular text panel that accompanies the photograph. The same width as the print, with the same blue color background as the studio set in the image, it hangs on the wall below the portrait, where it reads:

She arrived in Rome in 1989 to reunite with her lover and found a job straight away as baby sitter for a family. One day while she was cleaning their living room, she heard on the radio they were going to pass a law that would legalise every migrant on Italian soil. She was glad she listened to the radio that day.

With this story in mind, the critical dissonance internal to the image is amplified by the difference that the image registers from its initially suggested

position as an illustration of the caption, through its pairing with this descriptive text. The subject is not depicted cleaning or posed in a living room; she is not shown smiling as a result of hearing the news on the radio. We don't see children, which might suggest her role as a nanny. The blank space of the studio, save for the stereo, is instead a site of projection, of imagination, as it has been historically in West African studio portraiture, if for other ends. In this case, the studio is also an imagining of the artist's mother in Italy, armed with unrecognized African knowledge; it is also a space of *her* imagining, her ideation, of an Italy to come. At the same time, as a multigenerational self-portrait, as we might call this image – a self-portrait of the artist as her mother, which allows us to see the artist and to visualize her mother, notably embodied by the artist but not depicted in the photograph – the studio is also a space that ultimately registers multigenerational and deeply personal diasporic disillusionment with Italy.

Set in the late 1980s and made in the late 2010s, the context of the image (both the scene it imagines and the actual present-day image it is) is a time of intense political debate, surrounding Italian and European immigration policy, the latter at a moment of increased rates of cross-Mediterranean migration from Africa and the Middle East often accompanied by anti-Black and xenophobic violence in Italy. There is no such law, Rosi knows, and her image, seems to acknowledge, that legalized all migrants (and her mother) on Italian soil, in a country whose citizenship laws of *ius sanguinis* grant nationality to someone who has an Italian grandparent, but who has never lived in Italy and does not speak the language. Her gaze in the image (as self-portrait) seems to relay this disillusionment to us.

Visually paired with this image is *Self Portrait as My Mother on the Phone* (2019), another work from the *Encounter* series [fig. 9]. Printed in black and white, it registers the historicity of the scene, and, perhaps, the somber moment it captures. Staged on the same set, Rosi poses again as her mother. She wears the same dress, setting the image in the same time-period. Balancing a rotary telephone on her head, she holds the receiver to her ear with one hand and a tissue to her mouth in a gesture of self-composure, as if to stifle a cry. In this work, Rosi remembers a different, less promising formative moment in her mother's past – as suggested by the act of posing with an expression that registers fear and loss. The text caption reads: "She said she couldn't move, not again, not with a baby. She begged him to stay but he wouldn't listen. When she got home that night he wasn't there and his things were gone." Instead of using the idealizing language of West African

portrait photography to realize a fantasy version of the self, Rosi uses it to picture the most difficult, and therefore often the most private, moments from her family history. As she has put it: “I show the ugliest part of my family, the suffering and the struggles that brought us here.”⁵¹

Spectacular Concealment: Visual Refusal in Rosi’s Work

Rosi uses other strategies from West African studio portrait photography in other areas of her work. If we return to *Sposa Italiana Disintegrata*, we see a portrait that draws upon the use of props, but to different ends. In that work, Rosi holds a bouquet of flowers – typical props that are often found in West African studio portraits. Strangely, however, she holds them in front of her face. She holds a bunch of stems vertically; white peony blossoms block our view of her eyes. In the resulting portrait, the prop no longer complements but rather “conceals” (Rosi’s term) the subject.⁵² Rosi extends this practice of what we might call spectacular concealment – the use of a prop that draws visual attention to the act of concealing that which is meant to be seen (namely the face, in the case of a portrait) – to visually paired images in the series.

Consider *Disintegrata di profilo* and *Disintegrata altro profilo*, two independent but visually paired works – one in black-and-white, one in color, a difference underscored by the perceptual impact of the highly saturated scarlet-red background (of *Disintegrata di profilo*) that dominates the image field [fig. 10; fig. 11]. Installed on the same gallery wall in their debut showing, such that Rosi in each image faced herself in the other, the images function as estranged pendant portraits, made further strange by their capture of the same subject. They present quasi-mirror images of the same subject (Rosi again, though we cannot see her face) standing in right and left profile, one leg in front of the other, a slight bend in her knee. She is positioned centrally in the image field, posing in the same studio set. The photographs center Rosi, elegantly dressed in a long blazer, white button-up with pronounced cuffs, slacks, and black heels. She stands against a monochromatic background on a checkered studio floor, whose high-contrast pattern continues over a short platform that traverses the set behind her and image field of the photograph.

Further pairing these images is the artist’s use of the same prop across the works: a stack of two rectangular booklets, covers turned toward the viewer, one oversized, both propped up on their bottom edges so that they stand on the artist’s shoulder closest to the viewer. The artist balances the booklets with one hand; they fully block our view of her face and head. The first is a bright-red catalog, labeled “AGFA” twice, once in bold sans-serif font across

the header and again in cursive in a diamond-shaped logo in its upper-right corner. European viewers will recognize the branding; the continent's equivalent to "Kodak," the historic company has offered film, cameras, and other photography products to consumers since the nineteenth century and was one of the first companies to offer color film to consumers in the early decades of the twentieth century. The second is a smaller plain-covered album, placed in front of the Agfa catalog; the suggestion is that it is a photo album, perhaps containing sample images of Rosi-as-the-studio-photographer's work. The red background in Rosi's image doubles the color palette of the company brand. Other formal cues also recall (and depart from) an earlier iconic advertisement in Italy from the 1920s and 1930s that featured a (white) woman clad in red, centered in the image field, holding a camera with a shutter cable, which also appears in Rosi's image [fig. 12]. The styling of the catalog, its appearance in print, the presence of an old sales sticker, and presentation (in what seems to be a photo album sleeve), position it as an artifact of the 1970s or 1980s, apropos to the period of Rosi's artistic (and multigenerational diasporic) investigation.

Here, "photography" serves not to illuminate and record the subject, but to show the viewer that it fails to contain her. A black box replaces her head and occludes her identifying personal characteristics. There's a negotiation here: between Rosi as diasporic Italian subject (*disintegrata*), as African subject (the "twinning" images recall the familiar trope of the twinned or double image in West African photography, connected to the special spiritual value associated with twins), and within photography itself (itself also always a twin), between visual codes of "African" and "European" modernity.⁵³ The suggestion might seem to be that the subject is out of view, excluded from histories of photography, except as a racialized type. But Rosi's gesture plays a game with the viewer; it is humorous, at a basic level, that we cannot see her in the self-portrait, made even further humorous by the fact that we know that Rosi has made this decision herself. This refusal is amplified in critical valence at a formal and semiotic level. It calls to mind references to Italian interwar advertisements and Fascist print culture, which helped to codify Italian national identity as white while denigrating Black and Jewish people as sub-human and primitive, often with an emphasis on Black profiles and faces (shown in masks in colonial fairs, and in reproduction in gross stereotypes against white, classical, Aryan faces, as in the iconic first cover of *La difesa della razza*); but here the face is withheld, in a gesture of agency, concealed by a black box rather than being bound by it (as might happen in its use in Fascist design as a graphic element) [fig. 13].⁵⁴ The figure in this regard also strikes a pointed rejection of some of its art historical references. On one hand, Rosi's self-presentation might distantly recall the legacy of pastiche figures of Dada,

especially the photocollages of Hannah Höch, which themselves have been cited as modernist references for Fascist mass culture sources⁵⁵; on the other, instead of offering an ethnographic, primitive subject, as in many of Höch's images from the 1930s, Rosi offers us the cool, self-possessed cosmopolitanism of subjects from West African portrait photography: Sidibé's *A Yeye Posing* (1963), perhaps, and Fosso's self-portraits from the 1970s, among others [fig. 14]. Her confident pose, holding the shutter cable out, recalls the "ubiquitous hitchhiker pose" of West African studio portraits – a pose, as noted by Jennifer Bajorek, that spoke to the new on-the-go possibilities of faster transport and travel available to the modern subject.⁵⁶ The result is a refutation of the racialized Italian gaze that photography and mass mediation in Italy had constructed that might fix Black subjects in a primitivist position – a history that Rosi underscores with the prop of the Agfa catalog, and a refusal that she also underscores through an African visual language of cosmopolitanism, of belonging to modernity, and of family (as so many of these images were made to send to family). In this regard, if she is a type, her type is *fabulous* and entirely familiar to diasporic audiences: Black, African, and diasporic – and now, also Italian.

Conclusion: A Diasporic Archive

In the summer of 2024 there was a vitrine of photographs – all family snapshots – on display at the Collezione Maramotti, the contemporary art foundation of Italian fashion house Max Mara, located in Reggio Emilia. On view as part of an untitled installation, the vitrine appeared in the penultimate gallery of Rosi's solo exhibition [fig. 15]. Sourced from family albums and collections, the photographs belonged to and were gathered by the artist and her collaborators, who collected hundreds of images in the year leading to the exhibition from families of African descent, mostly in Emilia Romagna, who arrived in Italy before the 2000s.⁵⁷ Along with those images – all from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – other images were added by eligible visitors to the exhibition who were prompted to contribute images of their own – a point of invitational, participatory authorship underscored by an open slot on top of the vitrine. The photographs, and the archive of their composure, accumulated over the three-month period of the exhibition.

In addition to the vitrine, other photographs were installed as enlargements on the gallery walls, as staggered single pictures or in small groups of three, arranged in a row. Featuring different subjects but similar scenes, often in public space (as Pelumi Odubanjo has noted), the compositional format of the images recalled the tabular space of an album page (or perhaps a home's

gallery wall) as well as the narrative one of a storyboard.⁵⁸ Whether in a collective, unorganized pile in a vitrine, or as selected enlargements on gallery walls, the photographs indexed (and prompted the viewer to imagine) a real cartography and history of people of African heritage not migrating to but *living in Italy*. Recalling analog albums and boxes of photographs (after the digital turn, both outdated models of keeping photographs, most associated with older prints that never had a digital original), as well as image “atlases” from the history of art, the images telegraph their connectedness to albums (actual or possible, extant or not) from which they originated or might have – to albums and homes in Italy outside of the gallery. The work gets to the heart of the role of archives as a site of visualizing and constructing history, as a site of the (often idealized) stories we wish to tell through pictures.⁵⁹

While the installation’s material form and plural authorship positioned the vitrine (and archive) as a site of accumulation, its imagistic contents (of both its individual images and the genre of their association) positioned the photo pile and wall-mounted installation as more than a site of rote aggregation, but rather as a site of shared experience and of coming together. So too did the work’s identitarian and therefore collective, communitarian model of authorship, by local African-diasporic and African-descendent Italian families. More importantly, as family snapshots, having been taken on occasions both banal and celebratory that we mark with photographs, the images indexed their physical and sentimental connection to experiences of life, belonging to families who have long lived in Italy. For her part, Rosi sees this operation, of moving images from the space of the family to broader audiences as the means of transformation for the Italian vernacular, which only now might include images of African diasporic and descendent families in Italy.⁶⁰

At the same time, in the work’s slating as part of a body of work that appeared under this exhibition title – *disintegrata*, also the name of the series I discussed in this article – the vitrine denoted, especially under the sign of the original Italian, a literal and figurative state of having been splintered into tiny fragments, of having been deprived of any cohesion, of having come apart.⁶¹ If this mutual position – a coming together of that which has already come apart – is the procedural and visual logic of the work – it describes the construction and visual semblance of the work – then diasporic yet *emplaced* life, family, and home, is its poetics. In this regard, the works both engage and push against extant models that position migrant or diasporan subjectivity as the metaphor for existence in our postcolonial, globalized world, in which “rootless[ness], of living between worlds, between a lost past and nonintegrated present,” is the order of the day.⁶² Such poetics operate in dialogue with existing readings, namely by Odubango, of the work as a site of “implied containment,” in which the bodies brought together in Rosi’s

collection of photographs suggest a forced proximity, which we also cannot entirely access, as images in the transparent yet contained space of the vitrine occlude one another.⁶³

This is to say that the work is not all about displacement or a negative experience of diaspora – contemporary work (and theory) about diaspora often underscores the agency, multiple worldviews, and creative vitality of such positions.⁶⁴ Indeed, in this case, for viewers Italian or otherwise, the images telegraph a warm banality; taken on special occasions or not, they are familiar to us in their visual coding, through genre and medium, as personal family photos. At the same time, the images telegraph shared visual signs of *italianità*. They featured everyday people and telltale signs of quotidian and often, especially when observed collectively, distinctly Italian domestic and public life. Two snapshots taken in the same setting, for example, featured a home interior decorated with a printed portrait of Christ. Another photograph of a woman in a kitchen reveals a copper moka pot gleaming on a shelf. Others still were snapped in the parking lot of major Italian supermarket chain *ipercoop*; in front of a terracotta-colored *condominio*; next to marble monuments inscribed with “SPQR,” alerting viewers to their Roman setting. Other photos show people feeding pigeons in a piazza or posing on a balcony bordered by a Roman equestrian monument. A man is captured standing next to a row of Vespas. Other photos are more universal in subject: newlyweds ceremoniously cut their wedding cake; children play on lawns; a baby delights in kisses from a family dog. A woman smiles in the countryside; another on an urban street; another rides a bike past an auto service station with a Maserati logo in its window. Others still speak to the cosmopolitanism of the subjects and the different languages that often typify diasporic communities; t-shirts read “America” and “Nike”; a poster on the wall bears text in French. Among the images was a single photograph, resting at an angle amid the pile of photos, its flat surface and depicted subject pressed up against the clear glass container of the vitrine. The photograph captured a child, dressed in a yellow-and-mauve-colored mask and ruffled costume dress for Carnevale. Centered in the image field and photographed facing the camera head on, the child (and image of her) command some attention [**fig. 16**]. This photograph (and broader archive) addresses us first and foremost as a community-oriented artistic expression of familial experience and everyday life as immigrant African and Afro-Italian families in Italy. Such images, intentionally or not, ask us to see them, and to imagine their roles, in the intimate space and history of family.

Part of this banality comes from the works’ ontological position as snapshots – an entirely different aesthetic and photographic form than the highly staged West African studio portrait that Rosi references elsewhere in her practice,

even as those images possess a comparable familiarity as family photos. As such, these images are characterized by a “determined banality,” as photo historian Geoffrey Batchen has described the genre. They are part of a history of photography that, to some degree, standard histories of photography have long ignored.⁶⁵ In the context of contemporary Italy, which remains a place of anti-Black violence and white nationalism, they also mount a critique of persistent, and arguably resurgent, ethnographic nationalism on the peninsula. As Odubanjo has put it, the family album project underscores the important role of family photography for racialized diasporic communities, for whom the family photograph might be “crucial records of a fragmented family lineage,” a point of access to family histories of migration, and a means of important correspondence, as token sent to family elsewhere, as evidence and assurance of prosperity and community, even in their adopted homelands.⁶⁶ Rosi’s collection of them also examines “questions of how we can know a nation beyond the hegemonic narratives told about it.”⁶⁷

In this regard, the vitrine and its pile of snapshots models an accumulation of meaning that Blake Stimson has argued photographs can offer us “on the level of subjective affect.” The “formal iterability” of photography as a medium lends itself, for Stimson, to a model of expansive involvement, perhaps of the promise of universalist collective identity or partisan unity, or alternatively of the modern condition of alienation that makes us see photography “as a kind of alienation or baggage,” as a site of distancing and abstraction.⁶⁸ Rosi’s images seem to do both. By using the snapshot – “the most numerous and popular of photographic forms,” as Batchen described it – she takes the most common photograph, the most common image type, full of the most common conventions of bodily movement in photography, capturing a readily recognizable “social form of lived experience,” as Stimson might put it.⁶⁹ Yet for all this commonality, these images are still marked by difference; the family snapshot as genre offers us the viewer a phenomenological, embodied, and affective point of connection. These are not perhaps the bodies many expect – even in a vitrine, even one after the other, even en masse. In this regard, the persistence of difference through the model of race, itself codified through serial imagery and photography, over and beyond the universalist humanist site of the family photograph, is one critical message of this work.⁷⁰

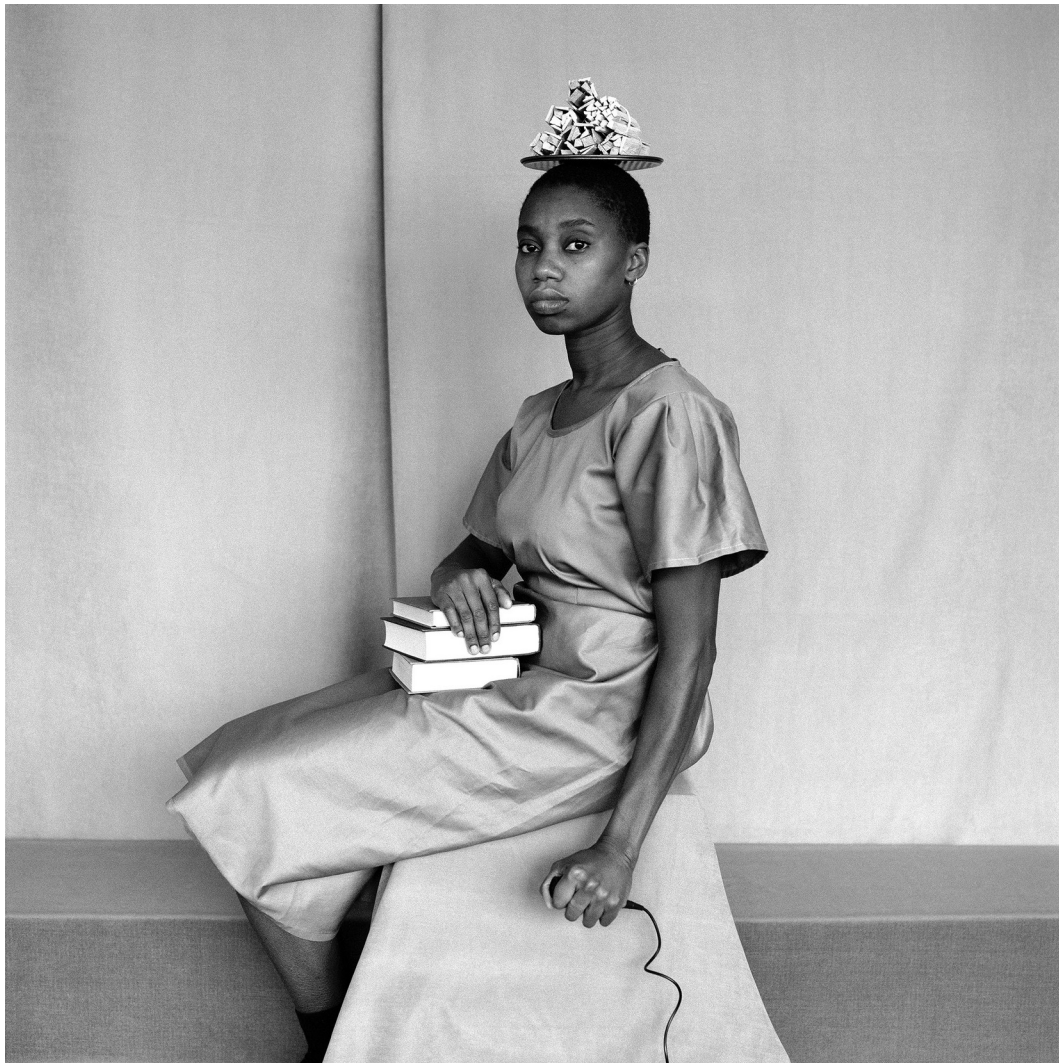
This archive, then, is not necessarily a construction of an archive that doesn’t exist. It’s the concretization of many archives, a meta-archive, that brings together images that have personal value for their owners. By bringing together that which exist in dispersion, in both family photographs and imaginaries, and that are tied to the lives of those who have had experiences like Rosi’s, the artist brings together a photographic archive of a local

diasporic imaginary. They demonstrate what we might understand as their syntactic function, by the collective screening they synthesize and generate, of diasporic home.

I emphasize these details because they demonstrate how Rosi's archive stages a visual recoding of the popular imaginary of Italy and captures images in Italy of Africa's diasporas. It stages a visual order of living in Italy that draws attention to persistent expectations of an Italy in visual representations that is (and has long been constructed as) phenotypically white. This syntax revises a symbolic order and popular imaginary of Italianness that, since the Risorgimento, has been explicitly and covertly racialized. As Italy was made "white," said whiteness was also naturalized; Italians see themselves, as Alessandro Portelli has written, as racially unmarked by this whiteness.⁷¹ The photos then, draw attention to that implicit and naturalized whiteness of Italianness that exists in tension with the images, in absentia. By bringing visual attention to people who have long lived in Italy – *de facto* Italians, by nationality or not – in the national lens of Italianness, in the warm lens of the family photo, the racialized visual code of Italian-ness is deconstructed and re-codified through the post-colonial and firmly humanist lens of lived experience.

In this regard, these two areas of Rosi's practice (the use of found snapshots, and the staging of multi-generational self-portraits) find common ground that potentially posits photography as the transnational, diasporic space of home, even as (or especially when) a sense of belonging in one's own home country isn't a given. West African studio portraiture is fundamental to understanding the stakes of this operation in Rosi's work in and about diasporic life in Italy. As Rosi once remarked: "The west African studio portrait has gained a sentimental value for me. I wasn't too familiar with its language at first. But now that I understand it, looking at pictures of my family album reminds me of home. It gives me a sense of pride and joy to look at my ancestors, who are looking back at me, almost as if they knew their photos would have traveled between continents to reassure me when I was lost and in search for answers."⁷²

PLATES



1 Silvia Rosi, *Self-portrait as my Mother in School Uniform*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She worked as a market seller from a really young age to support her mother. She would leave the house early in the morning with a tray of toothpicks carried on top of her head. She walked around the neighbourhood shouting loudly to attract customers' attention. After selling for about an hour she would go home, bathe, put on her uniform and walk to school with her sister." Courtesy of the artist.



2 Silvia Rosi, *Self-Portrait as my Father*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "He was an educated man from a good Togolaise family. He arrived in Italy with a few clothes, some books and the dream of finding a good job. A few weeks later he was picking up tomatoes in a field for a few cents a box." Courtesy of the artist.



3 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata in bici*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet prints (diptych), 80 × 80 cm and 80 × 20 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



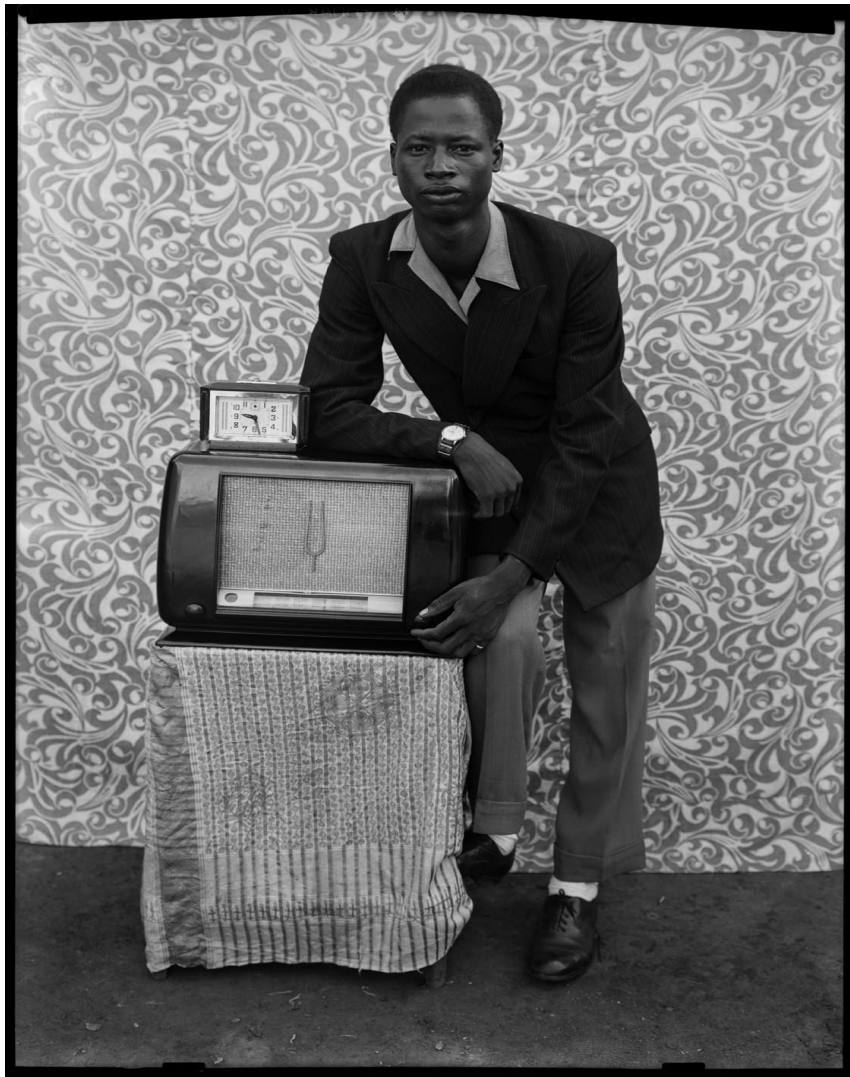
4 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata che aspetta*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print, 80 x 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



5 Silvia Rosi, *Sposa italiana disintegrata*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print on Baryta paper, 80 × 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



6 Silvia Rosi, *Sposa togolese disintegrata*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet prints (triptych) on Baryta paper, 80 × 20 cm each. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



7 Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, 1953/1957. Gelatin silver print. Fair use.



8 Silvia Rosi, *Self Portrait as My Mother*, from the *Encounter* series, 2019. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She arrived in Rome in 1989 to reunite with her lover and found a job straight away as a baby sitter for a family. One day while she was cleaning their living room, she heard on the radio they were going to pass a law that would legalise every migrant on Italian soil. She was glad she listened to the radio that day." Courtesy of the artist.



9 Silvia Rosi, *Self Portrait as my Mother on the Phone*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She said she couldn't move, not again, not with a baby. She begged him to stay but he wouldn't listen. When she got home that night he wasn't there and his things were gone." Courtesy of the artist.



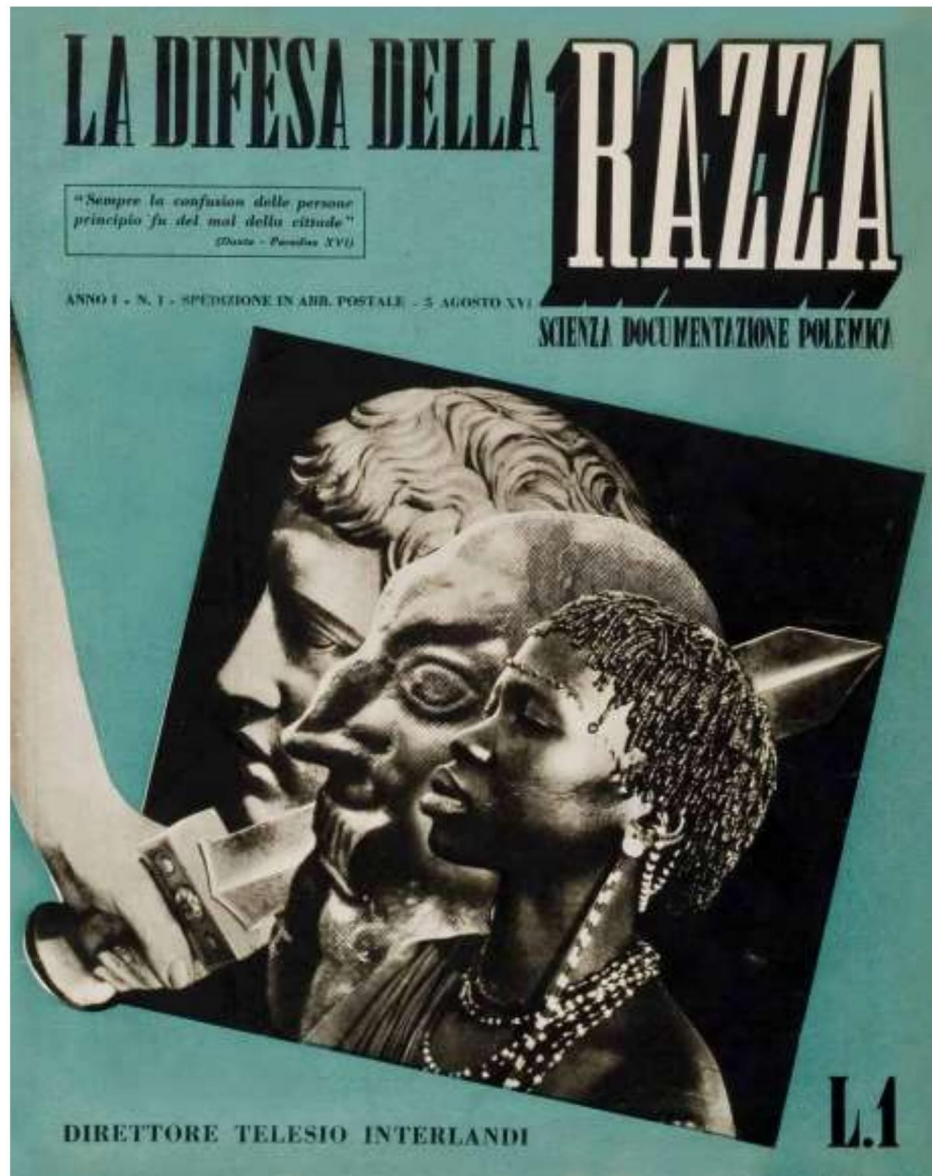
10 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata di profilo*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print, 80 x 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



11 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata altro profilo*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print (diptych), 80 x 20 cm and 80 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



12 Marcello Dudovich, *Agfa-Film*, c. 1922. Color lithograph on paper, 195 x 130 cm. Edizioni Star, Officine I.G.A.P. Milano. Museo Nazionale Collezione Salce. Public domain.



13 Cover of *La Difesa della razza* 1, no. 1 (August 5, 1938), featuring an untitled photomontage by Idalgo Palazzetti. Fair use.



14 Malick Sidibé, *Un yéyé en position*, 1963. Gelatin silver print, 38.1 x 38.1 cm. This image printed 1996. Fair use.



15 Silvia Rosi, untitled installation, in the exhibition *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, June 2024. Photo: Tenley Bick.



16 Silvia Rosi, untitled installation (detail), in the exhibition *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, April 28-July 28, 2024. Photo: Masiar Pasquali. Courtesy of the artist.

- ¹ Silvia Rosi, "Silvia Rosi," *Tongues*, February 18, 2021. <https://tongues.cc/articles/silvia-rosi/>. Rosi began these works after moving to London, where she trained at the London College of Communication. The artist moved to London for school in the 2010s, where, along with Lomé, she lives and works. Silvia Rosi, in "MAXXI Bvlgari prize: I finalisti," Youtube, 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL_VCvA3EqI.
- ² Silvia Rosi, "Silvia Rosi x Kimberly Drew," interview by Kimberly Drew, Youtube, March 24, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1fGUUKbRew>.
- ³ Silvia Rosi, "10 Questions with... Silvia Rosi," interview, *Aesthetica*, June 20, 2024. <https://aestheticamagazine.com/10-questions-with-silvia-rosi/>.
- ⁴ Silvia Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting the Classic West African Studio Portrait to Retell Her Family's History," interview by Eric Otieno Sumba, *Griot*, July 8, 2020. <https://griotmag.com/en/silvia-rosi-is-inverting-the-classic-west-african-studio-portrait-to-retell-her-familys-history/>.
- ⁵ "My artistic practice takes photography as its point of departure. I express myself through self-portraiture, video, and text, and I use images that belong to a family archive – in particular, images that depict members of my family in the Italian landscape. The images therefore go on to visualize a representation of Black subjects inside the territory of Italy." Translation by the author. Rosi, in "MAXXI Bvlgari prize: I finalisti," 2:04 to 2:18.
- ⁶ Silvia Rosi, "Re-inhabiting Stories: A Conversation between Ilaria Campioli and Silvia Rosi," interview by Ilaria Campioli, in *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata* (Dario Cimorelli Editore: Milan, 2024), 43.
- ⁷ On remembering and freedom, see Samuel Fosso, Clothilde Morette, and Silvia Rosi, "Conversations on Emerging Photography," Youtube, Novembre 11–14, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oayeuEI9Ls>.
- ⁸ Deborah Willis, "Introduction: Picturing Us," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, edited by Deborah Willis, 11 (New York: New Press, 1994).
- ⁹ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (International Center of Photography: Steidl, 2008), 38. See also Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63. I've referenced these thoughts elsewhere in my writing on the archive in contemporary Italian experimental documentary film. See Tenley Bick, "Film review, *Oltre i bordi* (Beyond the Frame), by Simone Brioni and Matteo Sandrini (5e6 film, 2023)," *Italian American Review* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 201–06.
- ¹⁰ Silvana Patriarca, *Race in Post-Fascist Italy: "War Children" and the Color of the Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–12 (11); Id., "'Gli italiani non sono razzisti': Costruzioni della italianità tra gli anni Cinquanta ed il 1968," in *Il colore della nazione*, edited by Gaia Giuliani (Milan: Mondadori, 2015), 32–45 (41, on 1960s film); Gaia Giuliani, "Bella e abbronzata. Visualizzare la razza nella televisione italiana 1978–1989," in Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*, 46–60; Giuliani's "Razza e Bellezza nella Televisione e nel Cinema (1977–1987)," in the broader roundtable on race and beauty in modern Italy: Gaia Giuliani, Monica Di Barbora, Vincenza Perilli, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Goffredo Polizzi, "Tavola Rotonda. Visualizzare la Razza e Costruire la Bellezza in Italia (1922–2018)," *Italian Studies* 73, no. 4 (2018): 432–60.
- ¹¹ Patriarca, "'Gli italiani non sono razzisti'," 38–43.
- ¹² Willis, "Introduction: Picturing Us," 20.
- ¹³ On Silvestri, see Federica Mazzara, *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion*, Italian Modernities 32, edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Robert Gordon (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 151–57. Also see Simone Brioni and

- Gianmarco Mancosu, "Remediating Family Memories of Italian Colonialism: Beyond the Frame as Process and Product," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (August 2023): 512–35 and Bick, "Film review," 201–06.
- ¹⁴ Giorgia Alù, "Uncanny Exposures: Mobility, Repetition, and Desire in Front of a Camera," *Cultural Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (September 2013): 19–41.
- ¹⁵ Alù, "Uncanny Exposures," 23, 26.
- ¹⁶ On Green's *Some Chance Operations* and its reflection on the filmmaker, actress, and producer Elvira Notari, whose career was stopped by the Fascist Régime, see Giovanna Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art – Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review* 105 (2013): 21–47, at 34–38. On Piras, see Tenley Bick, "Yara Piras," *Costell-azione*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.costell-azione.com/blog/yara-piras>.
- ¹⁷ Rosi, "Re-inhabiting Stories," 41.
- ¹⁸ On this subject, see Alessandro Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind: Notes on the discourse on race in Italy," in *Race and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern*, edited by Paul Strickland (New York: Routledge, 2005), 355–63; Angelica Pesarini, "'Blood is thicker than water': The materialization of the racial body in fascist East Africa," in *Zapruder World: An International Journal for the History of Social Conflict* 4, edited by Irene Fattacciu and Claudio Fogu (2017): doi:10.21431/Z33S32; Tenley Bick, "A History of Black Diaspora Artists in Italy," in *The Routledge Companion to African Diaspora Art History*, edited by Eddie Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2023), 174–89; and Tenley Bick, "'Un sentimento di libertà': Toward a Transnational Italian Art History," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (August 2023): 431–42.
- ¹⁹ For a good summary of the genre's formal qualities, see Elizabeth Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta," *African Arts* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 57.
- ²⁰ Rosi first saw such images at home in Italy and when visiting family in Togo as a child. On the commonness of this aesthetic to Rosi's generation, see Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."
- ²¹ See Jennifer Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1–4. Also see Tobias Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 39 (Spring 2001): 78–101; see also Giulia Paoletti, ch. 1, in her *Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).
- ²² Morette has referred to Rosi's use of West African portrait photography as a "visual language." It is an apt phrase that I use here. See Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, "Conversations on Emerging Photography."
- ²³ The absence of serious art historical scholarship on Rosi is perhaps surprising, given the increasing prominence of her work as well as curatorial and institutional engagement with it, both commercial and otherwise. Indeed, her work has been showcased in exhibitions at major institutions of contemporary art, focused on subjects ranging from contemporary arts of Africa's diasporas (LACMA, 2024–25) to contemporary Italian art (MAXXI Bvlgari Prize, 2022), and featured in gallery exhibitions in Rome, London, and other major centers of contemporary art. Prominent institutions in the U.S. (Brooklyn Museum, MoMA) have followed with acquisitions.
- ²⁴ See Odubango, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album," in *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, 68–71.
- ²⁵ See Rosi, "Re-inhabiting Stories," 42.
- ²⁶ Renée Mussai, "RPS Award Talks: Silvia Rosi with Renée Mussai," Youtube, March 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSEHH5YgNIM>. While the aesthetic was

already familiar to her in family photographs, Rosi first saw Samuel Fosso's work in a lecture while a student in Bologna; they reminded her, she often recounts, of her own family photographs, carried by her parents to Italy.

²⁷ Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, "Conversations on Emerging Photography."

²⁸ Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."

²⁹ Legacies of West African studio portraiture can be found in other diasporic contexts, as in the illusionistic backdrops used for staged photography in the Southeastern United States and Caribbean, among urban Black communities. See Krista Thompson, "'Keep It Real': Street Photography, Public Visibility and Afro-Modernity," ch. 1 in her *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Emerging scholars, namely Sahara Lyon, are also exploring the import of West African studio portraiture as a general source of "Afro-Pop visuality" for the work of contemporary African American artist Barkley Hendricks. It is a style that has even been used to signify and celebrate "African-ness" in mainstream contexts, as in Erik Heck's images of Lupita Nyong'o for *New York* magazine in 2009. Rosi's work, however, is more of a quotation of the style, posing, and material iconography of West African portraiture; she is also personally connected to the genre, which was first familiar to her originally through family photos.

³⁰ This description comes from the publisher's description of the author in Vannacci's autobiography, *Il coraggio vince* (Courage Wins) (Milan: Piemme, 2024). For an example of Vannacci's views on multi-ethnic Italy, see "La società multi-culturale e multi-etnica," ch. 4 in his self-published *Il mondo al contrario* (2023).

³¹ To that end, I've made efforts to forge that discourse. See Bick, "A History of Black Diaspora Artists in Italy," 174–89.

³² Bick, "'Un sentimento di libertà': Toward a

Transnational Italian Art History," 431–42.

³³ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image" (1977), in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 32–51, at 48–49.

³⁴ On Masslo, see Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro, and Domenico Perrotta, "Cheap food, cheap labour, high profits: agriculture and mobility in the Mediterranean," in *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area*, edited by Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro, and Domenico Perrotta (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–2.

³⁵ The subtitle read: "A Villa Literno il corteo anti-immigrati, la gente si giustifica 'Non è razzismo'." Fulvio Bufi, "'Via i neri, causa dei nostri mali'," *Corriere della Sera*, September 25, 1994.

³⁶ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 40.

³⁷ Wilson in this passage addresses Weems' *Roaming* series (2006). See Mabel O. Wilson, "Spaces in the Shadows: Archives and Architectures in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Black Modernisms in the Transatlantic World*, edited by Steven Nelson and Huey Copeland (The Center, 2024), 201. Indeed, phenotypic blackness in Italy has long been associated with foreignness. See Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind," 355–63; Pesarini, "'Blood is thicker than water'."

³⁸ The literature on this topic is vast. Nick Dines has recently addressed this history with a focus on sub-Saharan African migrant workers and tomato farming in Italy. Mass-mediated images and stories of sub-Saharan men, who often perform such labor, are common in reports on the notoriously poor conditions of Italy's tomato districts. See Nick Dines, "After entry: Humanitarian exploitation and migrant labour in the fields of southern Italy," 76.

³⁹ Rosi remarks upon this embodied experience of family stories.

⁴⁰ See Manthia Diawara, "Talk of the Town,"

- Artforum, February 1998, 64–71. Also see Bigham, “Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta,” 57.
- ⁴¹ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁴² Dines, “After entry: Humanitarian exploitation and migrant labour in the fields of southern Italy.” I’m thinking of images that circulated of the destroyed camp in Caserta in the September 1994.
- ⁴³ Lucia Piccioni, “Images of black faces in Italian colonialism: mobile essentialisms,” *Modern Italy* 27 (2022): 392.
- ⁴⁴ Steven Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews,” in *Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, Blackwell Companions to Art History (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 298.
- ⁴⁵ Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 43.
- ⁴⁶ Diawara, “Talk of the Town.”
- ⁴⁷ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁴⁸ On this gesture as a sign of labor, Rosi, “Silvia Rosi x Kimberly Drew.” On Rosi’s observations of the market, see Silvia Rosi, “Encounter – Silvia Rosi,” *No Wahala media*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.nowahalamag.com/post/encounter-silvia-rosi>.
- ⁴⁹ Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵⁰ Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, “Conversations on Emerging Photography”; Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵¹ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁵² For Rosi on concealment as a strategy in her self-portraits, see Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵³ I’ve had brilliant students, namely Quentin Clark, write on the topic of the twin in the photography of Yoruba photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, for example, which would be a relevant comparandum to this work.
- ⁵⁴ Piccioni, “Images of black faces in Italian colonialism: mobile essentialisms,” 375–96.
- ⁵⁵ See Mariana Aguirre, “La Difesa Della Razza (1938-1943): Primitivism and Classicism in Fascist Italy,” *Politics, religion & ideology* 16, no. 4 (2015): 370–90.
- ⁵⁶ Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa*, 3.
- ⁵⁷ Exhibition information, *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, distributed as brochure and online: <https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/exhibition-detail/-/silvia-rosi-collezione-maramotti/339441>. Rosi was assisted by Mistura Allison, Theophilus Imani and Ifeoma Nneka Emelurumonye. The presence of digital stamps (with file names) on the back of many of the prints suggest the artist had new prints made of family photos gathered for the project. Image collection began with an open call distributed digitally. On the digital open call, see Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album,” 69–70.
- ⁵⁸ On the tendency to show people in public space, see Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album,” 69. Rosi has explored such compositional formats, that similarly recall photographic media, elsewhere in her practice. A recent video work, for example, is shown on a vertically oriented screen, divided into three rectangular fields bounded by a black border, each containing the same looped video. The format of that work, which belongs to the *Disintegrata nel Paesaggio* series, recalls the individual frames of film.
- ⁵⁹ Odubango also asserts this point, focused on the role of photography in racialized, diasporic families, especially. See Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album,” 68–69.
- ⁶⁰ Exhibition text, Collezione Maramotti, <https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/exhibition-detail/-/silvia-rosi-collezione-maramotti/339441>.
- ⁶¹ “Disintegrare,” *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* IV (Torino: UTET, 1961–2002), 689.
- ⁶² See John Pepper, “The Diaspora as Object,” in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, edited by

Laurie Ann Farrell (Museum for African Art; Snoek, 2004), 29. This quotation is Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.

⁶³ Odubanjo, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 70.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," 296–316; Arjun Appadurai, on the diasporic public sphere, in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile" [1984], in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (September 2008): 123–24 (124).

⁶⁶ Odubanjo, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 68–69.

⁶⁷ Odubanjo, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 70.

⁶⁸ Blake Stimson, "A Photograph Is Never Alone," in *The Meaning of Photography*, edited by Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 105–15.

⁶⁹ Batchen, "Snapshots," 124.

⁷⁰ Stimson, "A Photograph Is Never Alone," 105–15.

⁷¹ Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind," 355–63.

⁷² Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."