

## Itineraries of Disruption

Located on a block framed by Balbo Avenue, my office at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago is precisely one mile from the Balbo Monument. This ancient column was gifted to the city of Chicago by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini during the Century of Progress exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair of 1933–1934. Both the street and monument pay homage to fascist aviator Italo Balbo and his squadron of twenty-five seaplane pilots and their crews, who undertook the transatlantic flight from Italy to Chicago during the fair. At the time, air travel was still in its early days, and a cross-Atlantic trip was quite remarkable. Following the flight, Seventh Street was renamed Balbo Avenue, accompanied by much fanfare and a grand parade in Balbo's honor. Nestled in a green space between Soldier Field and Lake Michigan, the weathered 2,000-year-old column stands atop a deteriorating pedestal adorned with molds of *fascis*—bundles of wooden rods often embellished with an ax, which came to symbolize fascism in the twentieth century. Inscriptions in both Italian and English evoke ancient Roman splendor while commemorating Balbo's flight and Italy's Fascist government. Despite its historical significance, the column lacks any marker or plaque to explain its presence and for much of the year remains largely concealed by foliage. Situated alongside bike paths in a transitional, unremarkable space, it is frequently overlooked.

Eritrean-born, Canadian artist Dawit L. Petros (b. 1972) uses these two commemorations of Balbo in Chicago as axes on which to revolve the latest chapter of his long-term investigation of the impact of Italian colonialism on North and Northeast Africa—and its subsequent imprint on the visual cultures, populations, and built environments of Africa, Europe, and North America. Through various artistic strategies, Petros probes the

propaganda used to promote the Italian colonial project in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, and Somalia and by extension, the newly formed Italian state; the technologies used to dominate occupied countries and simultaneously extoll the power of the occupiers; and the imperfect ways in which these histories are inscribed in public and private memory through monuments, storytelling, archives, and photography.

Petros's works are largely concerned with global migration patterns—from the Italians who occupied the Horn of Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s, to Africans who fled North and East Africa due to colonialization and subsequent instability, to Africans who move to North America and Europe via Italy today. Petros's own family left Eritrea when he was about two years old, amid Eritrea's bloody postcolonial thirty-year struggle for independence from Ethiopia (achieved in 1991). They migrated around East Africa for multiple years, and eventually settled in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada. Petros frequently speaks about the “dispersed consciousness” these experiences gave him, and how his early knowledge of overlapping cultures, languages, and places provided the deeply transnational outlook that he applies to his practice.

Petros has been working on themes of migration, colonialism, and modernity for more than a decade. In 2012 he began research for a new project, leading in 2014 to a thirteen-month journey through West Africa and Europe, tracing cross-border migrations of people within the African continent and across the Mediterranean into Spain and culminating in *The Stranger's Notebook* (2016–2017). His next project, *Spazio Disponibile* (2019–2020), started as an investigation into little-known patterns of migration by Africans from former Italian colonies, this time from East Africa to Italy and North America, research that led him to explore the links between modernity, colonialism, and labor in the Italian East African project. In photographs, serigraphs, and a video, Petros pulls from myriad

archival documents as source material, including pages from *Colonial Rivista*, a magazine published by Italian authorities as support for their colonial ambitions, and photographs of Eritrean laborers contributing to the building of modern Eritrea under Italian rule. Abstract maps allude to patterns of migration and movement, and archival materials such as postcards and photographs are manipulated to signal fractured and fabricated histories. A suite of still photographs and a video bring us to the built environment of Montreal, where Petros studied photography and video after leaving Saskatchewan for a two-year stay in Eritrea. The video focuses on Casa d'Italia, a cultural center that integrates modern architecture and fascist symbolism and houses another monument to Italo Balbo's flight squadron, who stopped there on their way to Chicago in 1933.

This project, *Prospetto a Mare* (2021–ongoing), takes up the next leg of Balbo's itinerary, from Montreal to Chicago. In it, Petros probes how the notion of progress espoused by the world's fair, and eagerly embraced by Italy, helped the Italian government divert attention from their violent colonial project. By that time, Italy had maintained a continuous colonial stronghold on present-day Eritrea and Somalia for more than forty years, with Mussolini and his Fascist Party reigning since 1922. Concurrently, the 1920s and '30s saw the golden age of aviation. Although flying was very risky then (as exemplified by the crash of one of Balbo's planes en route to Chicago, killing a mechanic on board), aviation held great promise for the future transport of people and goods, as well as the potential for military applications. Italy had already employed airplanes in combat during the 1911 conquest of Libya from the Ottoman Turks. Notably, the Savoia-Marchetti S.55, the plane Balbo's squadron flew to Chicago, was a variant of the aircraft used by the Italians to invade Ethiopia in 1935, just one year after the Chicago fair.

A foundational and new video work in *Prospetto a Mare, Il Dominio Del Aria (The Command of the Air)* (2021–2024), takes aviation as its starting point. Aerial footage slowly carries us past the critical stops on Balbo's journey, beginning with the air base in Orbetello, Italy, from which the planes departed to their various stops, including Shediac Bay, Montreal, and Chicago. In one segment, the aerial footage is mirrored between two screens, creating the effect of the sites expanding away from, and contracting into, themselves. This kaleidoscopic, fissured imagery delivers a disquieting montage suggestive of the complex histories of these locations, many of which have their own monuments to Balbo. Meanwhile, sounds evoking the experience of being in an airplane cockpit and a voice-over in Tigrinya, Petros's first language, overlay the work. The voice moves from questioning the technologies of flight and image production, to lyrics of a popular Eritrean song lamenting the distances that planes impose between loved ones, to a letter written by an Italian pilot to his father in Naples describing the first recorded dropping of bombs from an airplane in Libya in 1911. Images and words often fade to black, and the work's only two still images depict warplanes used in the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Then, at the end, Petros pairs a topographical map of Mekelle, Ethiopia, with an image of Balbo's plane superimposed over an image of Northerly Island in Chicago, directly linking Italy's brutal colonial project with the sanitized celebration of aviation technology at the fair.

As the footage starts to descend to the Balbo Monument in situ in Chicago, the two-channel video is suddenly interrupted by a single-channel portion, an entirely separate video called *Changing the Stone, Piercing the Sky* (2024). A speculative tale, the work takes as its premise the repatriation of the Balbo Monument to Ostia Antica, the location from which Mussolini took it originally, only its plinth remaining in Chicago. Petros does not show us the stone column, but uses stand-in materials instead—archival documents and photographs

from the 2005 repatriation of the stele known as the Obelisk of Axum, which was taken from Ethiopia by an invading Italian army and sent to Rome in 1937 to celebrate Mussolini's fifteenth year in power. A voice-over in the Ethiopian language of Amharic forms a poetic reflection on the corrective impulse to relocate or return such stone monuments to their original homes, and the human trials those actions might seek to conceal.

This subversive act of disruption—having one work cut off another—is founded on a logic of contingency, or the absence of certainty regarding historical events. Recognizing that inflated narratives heralding progress and power in the colonial project were often used to obscure a horrendous reality, Petros knows these histories warrant reconsideration. Moreover, he skillfully illustrates the concept of interwovenness by intermingling recent, past, and distant past events, suggesting that history, much like time itself, unfolds not in a linear fashion but in a circular manner. Furthermore, the ambiguity of events is underscored by Petros's fiction of the repatriation of the Balbo Monument as well as by the blatant falsity of the “documentation” he uses to communicate this imaginary.

A historian and photographer by training, Petros is familiar with the challenge of trying to delineate the real in either discipline, and in his art practice he embraces the instability and untrustworthiness of photographs as a conceptual framework. By foregrounding the malleability of images through his use of appropriation and manipulation, he also signals that in addition to the apparent meaning of an image, new meaning can be found in its inherent ambiguity and dislocation.

Photography's ability to blur the lines between reality and fiction lends it a problematic role in the history of colonialization. Photographs are always strongly coded representations, due to the subjectivity of the photographer, who makes innumerable decisions about subject matter, lighting, cropping, and point of view, ultimately determining

what is visible within the frame. Historian Silvana Palma highlights the significant impact of photography on shaping narratives about Africa during colonial times, noting how it swayed public opinion in favor of colonial endeavors. In her examination of colonial Eritrea, Palma emphasizes that analyzing what was depicted and what was left out of photographs allows us to gauge not only the limitations of Italian understanding of Africa, but also the power of representation, which “by establishing the horizon of the visible and proposing a manner of interpreting it, proved able to impose a perception—often a misleading one—of African otherness, so tenacious that it still partly survives unchanged today.”<sup>1</sup>

Petros delves into intricacies of visibility and invisibility in photography in colonial Eritrea in his series *Between departures, returns, and excesses of image* (2021). Using appropriated photographs of Eritrean and Ethiopian warriors taken by Italian photographers during the 1930s, he strategically eliminates all contextual elements and turns the backgrounds black. Inspired by futurist posters, Petros introduces crimson bands into the compositions, evoking imagery akin to flags, while the color itself invokes connotations of blood. Petros thus formulates a connection between nationhood and violence, and by stripping away contextual details, he imbues the subjects’ bodies with a sense of transcendence from the confines of time and space and redirects attention to their customary garb. This choice echoes yet another common trope of colonial photography, where “otherness” gained support through images promoting the idea of a “traditional,” distant Africa.

These types of anachronistic and romanticized photographs provided a homogenous image of Africa that circulated widely and obscured the cruel reality of the colonial situation. This illusion of cooperation and cultural sovereignty helped to mask political strife and vile practices such as forced labor in the colonies. As historian Paul S. Landau observes, “The

performed or photographed 'tribesman' was the visual manifestation of the phony stasis of custom, neatly concealing the dependence of whites on the coerced or semi-coerced labor of Africans."<sup>2</sup> The assemblage *A Constant Re-telling of the Future in the Past (Parts I-III)* (2021-2024) presents panels of images depicting laborers from three different eras: Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somalian, and Italian laborers constructing colonial spaces in East Africa (*Part I*); Italian laborers working on streets and buildings in Montreal, including an image of Balbo being greeted by the Italian Women's Fascist League upon his arrival in 1933 (*Part II*); and laborers of unknown ethnicity erecting various buildings for the 1933 Chicago fair (*Part III*). Reminiscent of old contact sheets, black-and-white images run sequentially in horizontal rows on the panels. Meanwhile the images themselves are segmented and fragmented, interrupted by black spaces between them, creating visual abysses that form invitations to consider what is missing within, and outside of, the frames. Questions arise: What are the limitations of, and what is not communicated by, such depictions? Petros's dissection of the imagery serves as a deliberate negation of the power of photography to tell stories, while the formal logic of the overall compositions makes a direct connection between these situations and locations.

In the series *Untitled (Epilogues)* (2021-2024), Petros centers Africa, Italy, and North America as consequential contemporary locations. Using a large mirror as a prop, young Eritrean men, many of whom are asylum seekers who fled Italy after not finding opportunity and safety there, stand in places significant to the history of colonialism in the Horn of Africa, Petros's personal history, and Balbo's flight itinerary. Holding the mirror so that it obscures their torsos and faces, the subjects deny us the opportunity to see them clearly. The locations are similarly complicated with the reflection of what's behind the camera appearing in the center of the mirror's frame, becoming fragmented and illusory. Once an

essential component of analogue cameras, the mirror implicates us as voyeurs, and becomes a metaphor for the reflective, often disjointed nature of identity, and how it can be both obscured and illuminated by location and nationality—whether of origin, arrival, or destination.

Dawit L. Petros considers all objects in this project to be works in progress. Like the histories his works address, and the monuments, documents, and photographs that communicate those histories, they remain open to fluctuating interpretation—a fluidity that extends to all works of art. Despite attempts to remove the Balbo Monument and rename Balbo Drive, both endure, the former now surrounded by a chain-link fence, presumably to deter vandalism, presenting a poignant visual metaphor. This odd sight aptly reflects the remove at which many people confront colonial legacies, and the fact that too many histories, like that of the Italian East African project, remain sanitized, shrouded, or forgotten. By incisively deconstructing established narratives of culture, migration, and power, Petros’s works remind us that the tendrils of the past reach into the present, emphasizing that history remains unfixed and unfinished.

**Karen Irvine**

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1 Silvana Palma, “The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented: Misrepresentations of African ‘Otherness’ in the Making of a Colony. Eritrea, 1885–1896,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 45, no. 177 (2005): 39–69, accessed via JSTOR, March 13, 2024.



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2 Paul S. Landau, "Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa," in *Images & Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 156.