

## **COSE BIZZARRE**

Text by Elisa Giuliano for Jermay Michael Gabriel's solo exhibition

*"I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So we are all."*

James Baldwin, *Notes on a Native Son*

*Cose Bizzarre* is Jermay Micheal Gabriel's first solo exhibition in Italy. It takes place at ArtNoble Gallery and presents a body of work in which Jermay explores that "much more" invoked by Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son*. His works in fact expose a set of codes that aim to transcend the paradigms of European history, revealing instead a genealogy that is more universal, but also deeply personal. Through their play with absence and presence, with form and being-formed, with doing and being-done, the works presented in *Cose Bizzarre* show how sensory perception and cognition are situated both materially and historically, venturing, however, to provide information about the future through a critical understanding of the past and present.

*Cose Bizzarre* takes its name from an expression often used by the voiceover of Istituto Luce documentaries to describe the objects, clothing, houses, rituals and customs of the indigenous peoples encountered in Ethiopia and Eritrea by Italians. The word "bizarre" has an uncertain etymology, but historically it has represented the strangeness, originality, and extravagance of "wild"-agile, quick, energetic, and unpredictable thinking, like a fairy that inspires awe. Jermay Michael Gabriel addresses this awe by materially intervening on images, nomenclatures and dates initially produced as ideological tools in support of colonial rule.

In order to generate a re-reading of Italy's colonial past, Jermay Michael Gabriel has in fact immersed himself in that *expanded archive*—located between the Horn of Africa and Italy—that includes drawings, photographs, sounds, songs, documents, monuments, and stories, in search of memories that, if discovered and interpreted, can unravel and unhinge those mythologies that still symbolically and politically shape historical memory. The creation of a phantasmagorical bus ride among Italy's *Via Adua*, the scattering of charcoal and burnt clay traces on the ground, the bur-

ning of messages and words, and the exposure to ravages of time of photographs taken in the Italian colonies, are some of the gestures that the artist has exercised on existing memories, preventing them from being enclosed into a defined gaze.

The works presented in *Cose Bizzarre* are thus direct interventions on matter, exercised by Jermay Michael Gabriel to surface its different layers. This molded matter is in fact transformed into a fossilized landscape, itself inscribed in a manipulated cartography, in which it is possible to trace those memories that, in a constant flux, move on non-linear trajectories. These gestures, expressed to conceal or reveal, raise a question: is it better to bury memory under the dust of time or should it be allowed to resurface in the full view of all?

*Cose Bizzarre* is an exhibition that as a whole exposes how visions and representations of people and places as radically “other” than ourselves depend mostly on power relations that are often difficult to break or reverse. Jermay Michael Gabriel reminds us through his works, and through his approach to artistic research, of the fatigue involved in reversing the gaze from the margins, as the power relations that constituted them can seem ultimately indelible. We can thus still aspire to a critical understanding of these power relations and our role within them. In *Cose Bizzarre*, Jermay Michael Gabriel stimulates and instigates this precious understanding by actively and materially intervening in the visual paradigms that, though created in the past, continue to fuel dominant ideologies in the present.

Elisa Giuliano