



Atlas

Sorrel Hofmann



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UCT Irma Stern Museum

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Cover Image *Untitled (desert)*, 151 x 194cm, Ink, watercolour, henna on Fabriano







Across Oceans
2016
Watercolour, graphite, henna on Fabriano
250 x 151cm





Atlas

Andrew Lamprecht

The artworks that comprise this exhibition are the product of an on-going research project that Sorrel Hofmann has been engaged with for a number of years: an examination of the place and space occupied by women on the African continent. Specifically, these works, made in Cape Town and in retrospect, reflect a residency undertaken a little over a year ago by the artist at Sefrou, an ancient town that lies at the edge of the Atlas Mountains, 30 kilometres southeast of Fez in Morocco. Deliberately eschewing the normal tourist routes of a country habitually exoticised by and for the West, Sorrel chose to engage deeply with the women she met and attempted to understand the position that they occupy and have occupied in Moroccan history. Images of the harem are well known in western art history through the orientalist painters of the nineteenth century. Serving as something like a genre of highbrow ersatz pornography for a male (hetero) sexist European gaze, these works perhaps more

than any other form of orientalist othering, served to construct an image of the Arab world and Islam as 'other', strange, sexually-charged and 'exotic'. The strict separation and segregation of women to the confines of the harem was almost universally practiced in Morocco until its independence in 1956 and while the rights of women have seen minor advances since that time, and especially during the reign of the modernizing monarch Mohammed VI who ascended to the throne in 1999, there are still many forms of seclusion and estrangement (whether physical, legal or conceptual) that most women still experience in this ancient and culturally exceptional country.

Arabs, Berbers (a culturally distinct people) and Jews have co-existed with mutual respect and toleration for over a millennium in Morocco. In a globalized world, and due to international events that have unfolded since the start of this century, this state of affairs has experienced strain but Sorrel observed that it is still in force today, a fact that impressed and moved her. As an artist and researcher, she was at pains to maintain objectivity





and not place herself in a position of judging a culture from outside, based on a relatively short, though intense and focused time in Morocco. Nonetheless her conversations with women, Berber or Arab, modern or traditional, left a deep impression on her and are a key element in the works that make up 'Atlas'.

Much of her time was spent in the environs of the Medina, or old city, both in Sefrou and Fez and these observations were complemented by visits to the old Jewish quarter, the Mellah. Jews have been an active and important part of the history of Sefrou for over two thousand years, and while that population's numbers have dwindled in recent years, the presence and physical traces of this important history were everywhere to be seen, and indeed reflections of the Mellah and Medina can be seen in many of the works exhibited.

The Atlas Mountains, which loom over and circumscribe the town of Sefrou – much as our mountain does for Cape Town – can be read in many works too, though Sorrel frequently

pointed out to me that nothing is ever quite what it seems in her work. For me she is a suggestive (and generous) artist, inviting many possible readings and viewings in her work, prescribing none. Thus, what may be seen as a range of mountains in *Untitled* linocut can also be seen to be a reclining female figure. The Atlas range is the northern boundary of the Sahara Desert and Sorrel went to the mountains, into them and over them to the Sahara where she spent a few days in a Berber camp, all the while engaging with local families and especially the women. The Sahara has clearly also been a major source of inspiration. Sorrel recounted to me a profound moment of discovery that happened when she went into the desert alone. Fearing that she might lose her way in the dunes and amongst the shifting sands, she placed small markers of twigs and then bits of her cigarette box as she traversed the landscape, a sort of makeshift riff on Ariadne's thread. As her vision accustomed itself to the topography of the desert she noted that though the sands shift and the dunes move, pathways and almost invisible 'roads' exist in Sahara, accessible to all with eyes





but visible to those who take an effort to look for them.

For me this anecdote was key to gaining access to these works. Sorrel's marks are easy (too easy!) to categorise as 'abstract' and her mark-making, deft, confident and magisterial may at times appear to be arbitrary – as if they are random fragments of an ephemeral moment. This is incorrect, I would offer. Thinking back to the artist's moment of insight (quite literally in-sight) in the desert one should perhaps spend some time to accustom and acclimatize one's eyes to the visual topography (and cartography) inscribed on the canvasses and papers around one. Then, as I have discovered, the marks provide routes through and into the world of this artist. As noted before there is no one meaning and the artist herself is thrilled when a viewer discovers some form or echo of a form that had never been part of her intentions in making a given work.

In 'Atlas', high walls abound, as do fences, areas of demarcation and circumscription; female

forms (sometimes representational as in *Across Oceans* and at other times symbolic and stylized though nonetheless unmistakable as in *Couloir*) are evoked and embroidered into landscapes, cityscapes and 'abstract' swirls. As you let your eyes travel over her surfaces the journey becomes, for me at least, one of excitement, fear and not a little melancholy.

In my discussions with Sorrel around these works she returned again and again to the phrase 'behind high walls' in her conversation. I would suggest that this is another key, perhaps the master key, to 'Atlas'. The mountains are a sort of 'high wall' keeping in the desert and keeping out the rest of the world. As such it echoes the high walls of the harem, beyond which no one may venture without the family patriarch's permission and into which no adult male outsider may ever venture. The journey from one side of the high wall to the other may be miniscule in geographic terms, but as daunting and epic as any trek across the Sahara or over the Atlas range itself.





The Medina, the high walls and the bounded spaces experienced by Sorrel can be seen in *Un Voyage*. Intended to be read from right to left (the only work on this exhibition that utilizes this strategy) each panel evokes a stage in a journey, a pathway out and beyond. At the extreme left, in the last panel, I read an exit, beyond the desert and over the mountains.

In common parlance, the word 'atlas' (etymologically unrelated to the mountain range that features so forcefully in these works) generally connotes two things: a book of maps and the titan of Greek mythology who is said to bear the world upon his shoulders. The last meaning also serves



Un Voyage

2016

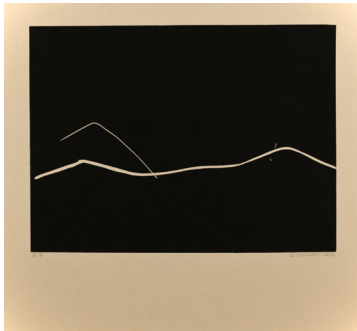
Mixed media on canvas on board

Size variable, size overall 262 x 138cm





metaphorically to describe a person who carries some unbearable burden. The providential confluence of the three meanings of 'atlas': mountain, cartography and burden (psychological as well as physical) will, I suggest, be visible in the tracers and lines and in the swathes of colour and shifts in media that comprise Sorrel Hofmann's solo exhibition of the same name. The journey portrayed here is much less about crossing deserts and scaling mountains than about climbing over high walls and out into the light of day.



Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
32 x 35cm



Couloir
2016
Henna, graphite on Cartiera Magnani Italia







We are no more, until we will be what we are

Jill Trappler

Instead of geographical images on the pages in an Atlas, we have an Atlas of images filling the gallery. In both we experience the vastness and language that is not familiar; we find a word or a river, a point of location to start our journey. In the art works the abundance of information is refined into shapes, picture planes and surfaces touched by narrative. Informed by experiences, the work becomes the reality of the artist. Reality challenges preconceptions and opens us to journey with another, freely. Then “we will be what we are”, located at the beginning of a visual journey, Atlas surrounding us.

Beside the tactile facture there appears to be a “matter of factness” about the artist’s approach to her work. This is of the nature of a person with a divining stick in their hands. She wonders until the quivering starts and the divining stick vibrates with the subterranean streams. Or of a person who stands with a telescope and views the length

of the desert, moves up to the horizon and across the sky, day or night, new moon or full moon. We are asked to zoom in, pull visual information closer in order to then “be what we are”.

This is the first solo show of work by Sorrel Hofmann. On her website, she writes; “we will be what we are until we are no more.” Navigating this exhibition suggests that we could reword this and say; we are no more, until we will be what we are.

The geography is expansive and overwhelming, the connection when it is made is specific and intimate. (Large shapes describe spaces and marks gathered hastily give definition; they seem to say, be here, on this surface.) Shapes give us direction and make places; we can say, “we will be what we are until we are no more” because the making of the image has begun and the shapes find their way into the shape of the format and tell a story, the story of why it is being made. It is a purposeful journey story of wanting to share with us and show us geographical situations.

The “matter of factness” that is apparent initially, changes to urgency; (the divining stick vibrates





and we need to dig for water) Yet there is a slowness and deliberation in just how to relate the shapes to one another. There is not much overlaying, the shape is placed once, the line is drawn and left. Something is added or not. The images are built with an elegance and they are not about a particular thing or object. These references, these markers are skeletons for us to explore, stop, wait and resume our wandering. There are objects and the spaces between become places for the eye to glean and travel. Time is measured and temporal, directions unspecific. Shapes describe place. The place in the shape of the format, a place within the shape, a shape within a place. Landscape.

The sense of happenstance is inverted by that of reality; in some of the images we are taken into the distance, (over stretches of earth, around places/objects, towards a mountain, over the horizon...) or we journey as if on the face of a compass, or we are directed left to right, bottom to top, top to bottom. There are no short cuts. The artist has been there, witnessed the place physically or through a lens. Her eye has been

there and she leads us in this body of work to journey with her.

John Berger writes about “the shape of a pocket”; this is about a small pocket of resistance, resistance against inhumanity. In Atlas, this exhibition of collages, drawings, mixed media, prints and installation, we are presented with little pockets of information. They speak of the need for humans to respect the wonders of our world. The earth and especially the deserts, the clear skies, the shadows; the mysteries this all holds are shown to be so very precious. “we will be what we are until we are no more.”

The world in these images, is not empty but magnificently full, vibrating with a skeletal significance that we are encouraged to quiver with and absorb. We are asked to resist any interference or indignities that humans are possible of imposing.

These images describe Sorrel’s reality, her way of resisting the preconceived notions of the world. One of her fellow students in a drawing class





observed that Sorrel “encourages us to be faithful to our way of seeing”.
Indeed, she is practising what she encourages in others and suggesting, gently what we too can shape up to, “until we are no more.”



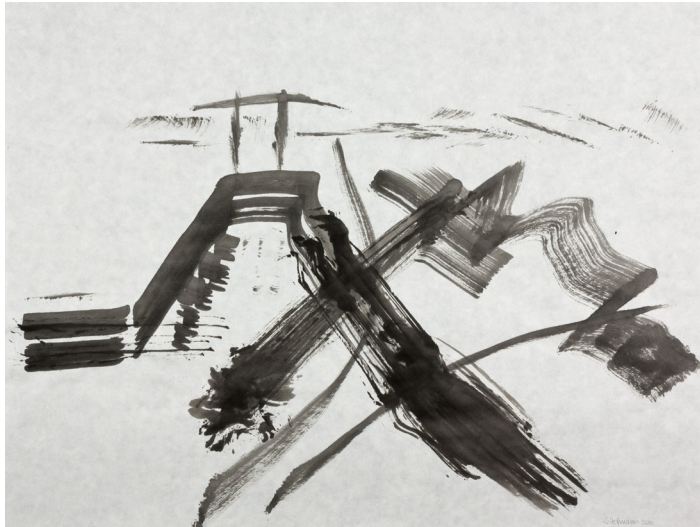


Climb up and up
2016
Ink, graphite, charcoal on paper
36 x 51cm



Journey over the Atlas 111
2016
Ink, graphite, henna on paper
30 x 40cm





Stone Gate
2016
Ink on Japanese paper
50 x 65cm



The Fence
2016
Ink on Japanese paper
65 x 50cm



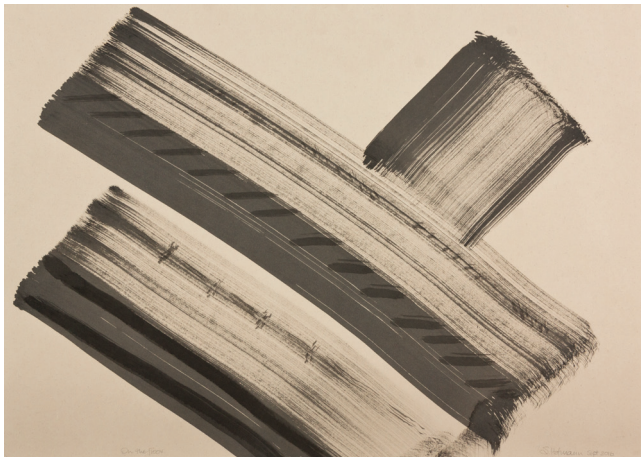


Journey over the Atlas 11
2016
Ink, watercolour on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
50 x 70cm



Journey over the Atlas 1
2016
Ink, watercolour on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
50 x 70cm



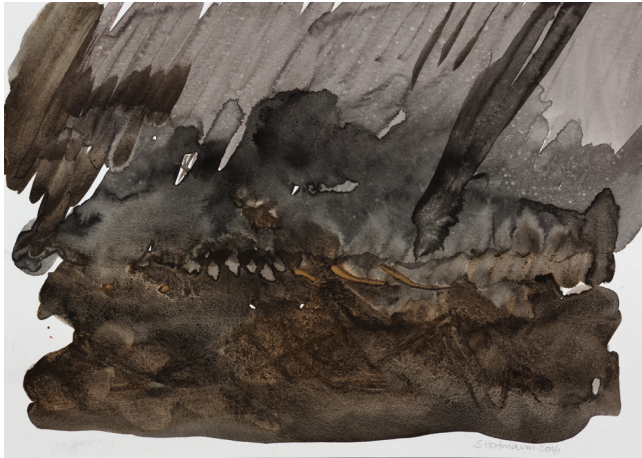


On the floor
2016
Ink on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
50 x 70 cm



in the Atlas
2016
Ink, watercolour on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
70 x 50cm





Through the night light
2016
Ink & henna on paper
29.7 x 42cm



From 3 sides
2016
Henna, graphite, enamel and ink on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
20 x 27.5cm





Dunes II
2016
Ink, oil, graphite on Arches
101.5 x 152.5cm





Dunes I
2016
Ink, graphite on Hannehmmule Etching
100 x 125cm





The Yard
2016
Ink, watercolour, henna on Fabriano
151 x 192cm





Untitled (desert)

2016

Ink, watercolour, henna on Fabriano

151 x 192cm



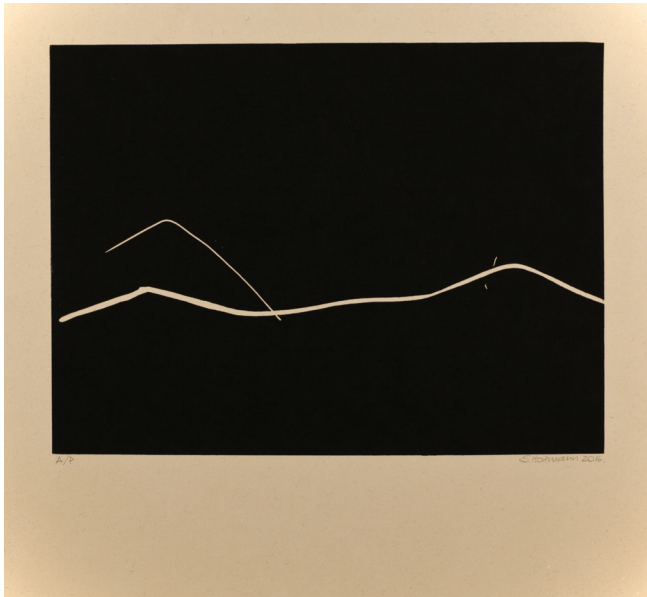


Untitled
2016
Oil, ink, acrylic, RSG on canvas
142 x 43cm

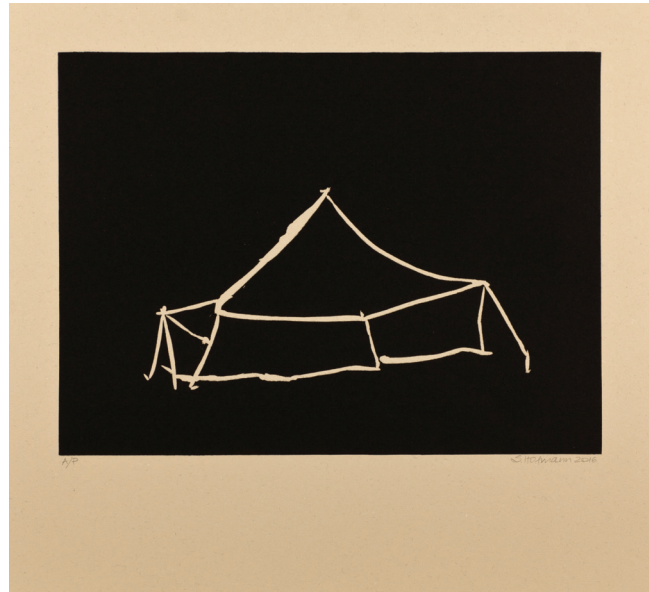




Untitled (Sagesse)
2015
Mixed media on Arches
152.5 x 101.5cm



Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
32 x 35cm



Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
32 x 35cm





Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
32 x 35cm

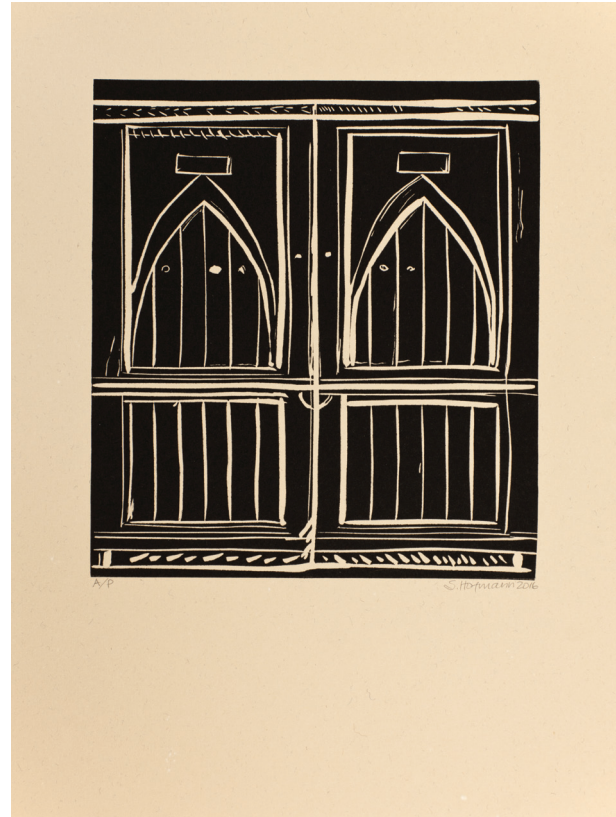


Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
32 x 35cm





Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
23 x 22.5cm



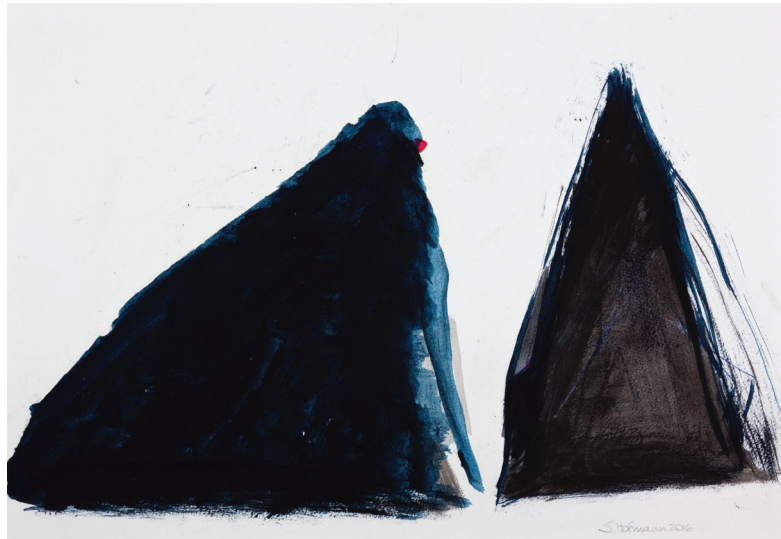
Untitled
2016
Linocut, edition of 7 on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
34 x 26cm





Untitled
2016
Ink, watercolour on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni
51 x 43cm



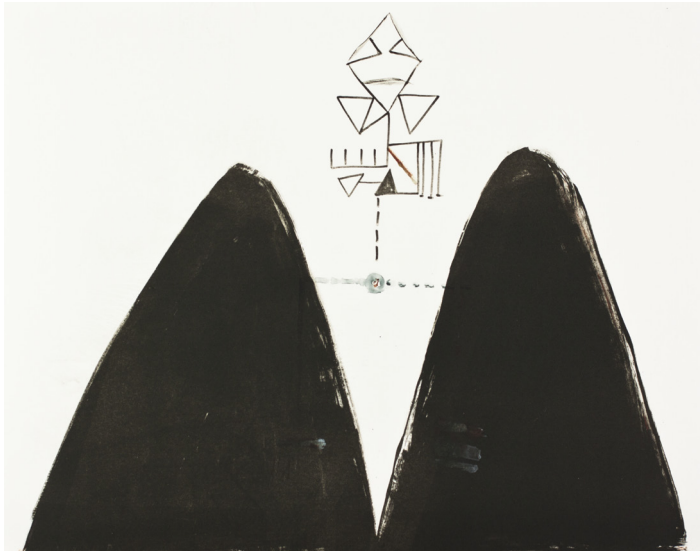


Behind high walls I

2016

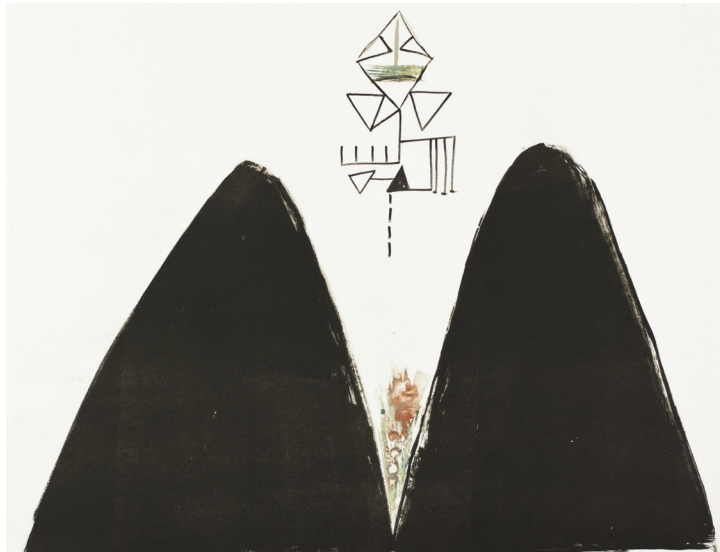
Ink, pigment, charcoal on paper
36 x 51cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
36 x 51cm





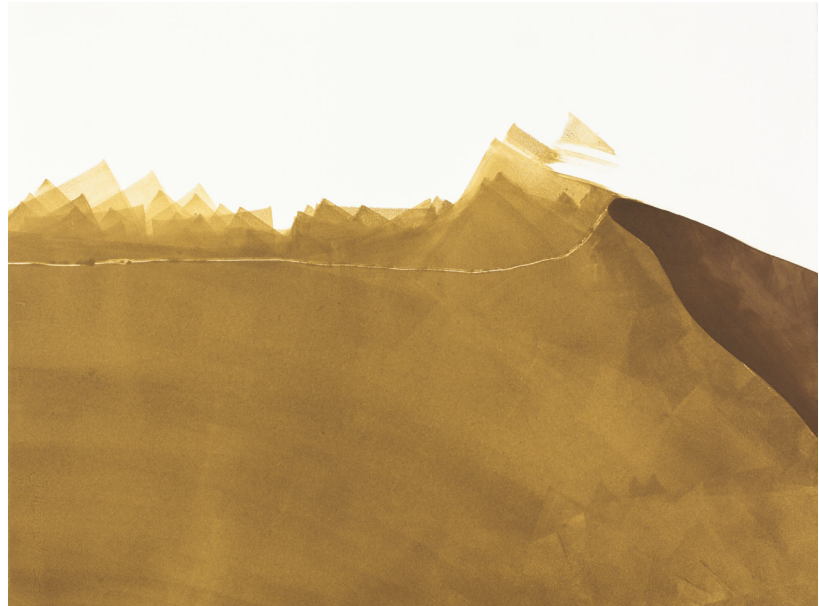
Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
36 x 51cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
36 x 51cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
50 x 65cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
50 x 65cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
65 x 50cm





Untitled
2016
Monotype, oil based ink on Arches
50 x 65cm





Un Voyage

2016

Mixed media on canvas on board

Size variable, size overall 262 x 138cm





No Entry (Military Ruins)

2016

Ink, graphite on Cartiera Magnani Annigoni

Size variable





No Exit
2016
RSG, pigment, watercolour and ink on canvas
36.65 x 51.5cm





we will be what we are
until we are no more.

