



Chance Encounters

Artist and curator in conversation

All the works being created for Museo Sant'Orsola's upcoming exhibition (opening 5 September 2025) aim to show visitors that our future museum will strive to enhance the memory of the place. The museum does not have a surviving collection, because the complex's cultural heritage has been dispersed, destroyed and forgotten," says Morgane Lucquet-Laforgue, Museo Sant'Orsola's curator. "My guiding question is this: How can we remember and share the history of the place through contemporary action, and through the gaze of contemporary art?"

"For centuries in Florence, artists were commissioned to produce, and we'd like to

continue that tradition. At the end of each show, we hope to acquire one artwork per artist, to form the museum's permanent collection," Morgane continues. "The twelve artists featured in the September 2025 show – eighty percent of whom are women – will be working in dialogue with the space, including the excavation site, and several employ ancient techniques once used or presented at Sant'Orsola."

The space was originally conceived as a convent, became a tobacco manufacturing plant and, in the 1960s was repurposed as housing for refugees from Istria (former Yugoslavia, and once Italian territory). Hundreds of refugee families lived in the

Left: Mireille Blanc, *Clémentine*, 2023



complex for decades. Through the centuries, it has hosted and witnessed thousands of lives. “Right now, it’s a fascinating moment and the very last time the future museum site will have such large walls, and so much room, in which to create,” Morgane explains. “When our September show ends, this space will become a construction site, as the venue is renovated. The new museum is scheduled for inauguration in autumn of 2026.”

As Morgane’s dozen trickle into Florence this spring, to create their site-specific artworks, *Restoration Conversations* is on site as well, for interviews with the visiting artists (See pp. X and X). In the first of this interview series, we met French artist Mireille Blanc, for whom Morgane is exploring the State Archives, including the Napoleonic registers, to find documents

describing convent meals, which are certain to inspire Mireille, as she produces her small-scale works and one monumental piece for the show. “I’ve followed Mireille’s work for quite some time, with the idea that someday we would work together. Two years ago, after meeting Bianco Bianchi, a scagliola master in the neighbourhood, a thought came to me: why not put artist and artisan together, since Mireille explores a lot of their same subjects – still life, food, deserts, plates, tables and materiality,” says Morgane. “Once you see their works together, you will understand the link.”

Born in 1985, in Saint Avold, France, Mireille is a figurative painter based in Paris. She teaches at the National Academy of Art of Paris (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts de Paris). She

is represented by Anne-Sarah Benichou gallery in the French capital and The Pill in Istanbul. Our conversation started with reflections on her first encounters at Bianchi’s studio, which just so happens to be an Italian variant of her own surname Blanc.

“For the Museo Sant’Orsola, I am working with Bianco Bianchi, in collaboration, not directly in their studio, and we are creating a dialogue between painting and scagliola. Their craft involves making marble-like inlays with coloured pigments, natural glues and selenite powder. Having access to their studio, where this artisanal work is passed down through generations, is pushing me to think differently! I paint very quickly, and my canvases are generally small – so in one week’s time, I produce an artwork,” says

Mireille. “Seeing crafters working for months on a single piece, their engraving process, the way they mould matter to create a surface, it’s like watching a layer of time form, and then be sanded down.”

When asked how the scagliola technique differs from her own process and why she thinks the project relevant, Mireille explains the following: “I work in one go, with fresh paint that is never quite dry. Scagliola is a very different process, and it is useful for me to see the patterns inherent in this craft. There is no room for ‘the accidental’, which so often characterises my own painting. But there is an element of trompe-l’oeil in scagliola, which is relevant to my work with illusions, and the kitsch aspect in my paintings. I look at my subject and see things from above,

which tends to make things more abstract, because it distances you from them, which doesn't happen when working vertically, with a painting propped on an easel. Bianco Bianchi and I share the perspective of our vantage point.

With this project Bianco Bianchi's studio will start from my painting to create original work. Some say scagliola is a dead artform, and others say the same about painting in France, claiming it is not contemporary. But painting or scagliola are just tools... why should they be stuck in the past, when it is simply a matter of what we choose to do with them?"

Mireille's art explores the idea of chance encounters with everyday objects, which become enigmatic and ambiguous. "We paint what we are, and as a viewer, I push everyday objects towards abstractionism – or at least make them appear stranger. I believe that adopting a 'new gaze' enables us to observe history and the past with freer feelings. I need to paint, photograph and crop, and with the visual framing of an image, guide the gaze. I like to 'disturb' objects. I look at items from humanity's common past, things that remind me of childhood and our collective memory – not necessarily my own. I seek the



Above: Mireille Blanc, Anniv (J), 2024



Left: Mireille Blanc, Grappe (Marceau), 2024

intimate nature of childhood objects, but my choice of subjects is never pre-meditated. In a word, I want to make mundane objects odd, and familiar things visible."

"I like to work with the end of things – after the moment of celebration, after the cake is cut. My destroyed-cake painting is one example," Mireille says. "I work with patterns in oil and find thick impasto exciting. That is why I like to paint the cream and frosting on cakes! People make cakes in the shape of something else – like cars or castles

– and place funny, even eerie statues on top. My work with all things kitsch is about limits – feeling that I have taken an object that is disturbing, and transforming it. I work with the strangeness of all that is glittering, glowing and shiny. Essentially, my work is about fascination and repulsion. I strive to reach beyond expectations of good taste, to overcome initial repulsion, and in this process, I see painting as a way to sacralise, transcend and elevate. Objects, after all, are keepers of stories, like a souvenir."

LINDA FALCONE