

The word ‘history’ carries two distinct sorts of meaning. It’s what occurred in the past – whether that’s everything that ever happened, or else a particular series of events. And secondly it’s the study and narration of the past – that’s to say, history as discourse: something traditionally undertaken by historians, of course, using the written word, but which has also become a central concern in much recent art. *Field Work* presents work exploring different meanings of history by eight such artists – all of whom sit within the rubric of Tiwani Contemporary’s focus on Africa and its diaspora – and highlights some of the pleasures, but also the pitfalls, of this mode of practice.

The main pleasure is simple: being introduced to overlooked, fascinating facets of history. Two works here offer such glimpses. Theo Eshetu’s *The Mystery of History and My Story in His Story* (2015) is a vast print of a photograph from the archive of the late Marshal Tito, president and dictator of Yugoslavia (to which Eshetu’s grandfather served as Ethiopian ambassador), depicting Soviet sailors poring over a map of Africa – hinting, perhaps, at a curious confluence of Cold War and African Independence narratives. And Abraham Oghobase’s *Ken’s Smoking Pipe* (2016) features recordings of speeches by executed Nigerian

activist Ken Saro-Wiwa along with images, including a scan of one of his trademark pipes – presumably meant as a sort of meditation on the object-as-relic. And yet, if Saro-Wiwa’s pipes are, according to the press release, all collected in his former offices, why is only one depicted here? Similarly, why only one image from Tito’s archive? Both works end up seeming slightly meagre, like preliminary investigations.

Indeed, one of the dangers of historically minded work is a sense of superficiality. Too often, a piece’s effect is simply to make you want to turn to written history, to get to the real meat of the matter. Or sometimes it can be the other way round – that a work is tied too tightly to a corpus of history, like a compendium of known facts. That’s the case, unfortunately, with *I was her and she was me and those we might become* (2016), a video by Kitso Lynn Lelliott, whose imagery of overlapping female figures dressing and undressing against a background of navigational star charts, switching between African and New World garb, is a rather too obvious illustration of Middle Passage motifs.

The opposite tack, then, is to leech away all specific references, to evoke the oblivion of time’s passage rather than any particular period. Youssef Limoud’s *Ruins* (2013–16)

are invented, ramshackle models of ruined buildings, themselves constructed from broken cuts of wood and junk. And Rita Alaoui’s cellular drawings of magnified objects found around Casablanca’s beaches – bones, wooden flotsam – may be titled *Objets Trouvés* (2014–16), but equally they’re about how items become lost and anonymised through history.

The most effective works, though, explore how history, as a discourse or story, is recorded and represented. Robel Temesgen’s handwritten newspapers, *Another Old News* (2016), containing subjective, remembered accounts, are a nice comment on the conjectural nature of narrative. And writing, or rather its failure, is also central to Thierry Oussou’s large, untitled works (2016), where he borrows prehistorical, protolinguistic marks from various anthropological sources, painting and drawing in a mad, multicoloured, meaningless abandon. But the most astute piece here is a lightbox-mounted image, *L’Oeil se noie* (*The Eye is Drowning*, 2016), by Katia Kameli, which initially resembles a fabricated montage of different Algerian themes and periods – but in fact is a single photograph of a postcard stall, the random juxtapositions of stock portraying history as a kind of chaotic, intricate medley. *Gabriel Coxhead*



Katia Kameli, *L’Oeil se noie*, 2016, backlit film print in PMMA lightbox, 60 × 90 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London