

Statement by Fabrizio Ruggiero

The urgency of "... putting people at the center of everything we do", as stated by President Sam Kutesa in his acceptance speech in June 2014, has been a challenge for all peoples in the world. This has been translated into a common language of artistic inspiration within the family of nations on our fragile Mother Earth now threatened by the dramatic consequences of climate change. The global network of cultural communication works in mysterious ways. One has to imagine millions of invisible threads running across the planet and its celestial skies, giving birth to the creative impulse. This is the ultimate unifier because Art is the expression of life. Art creates bridges where politics divide. Pre-conceptions fall, judgments are suspended.

This exhibition was created with the conviction that the artistic impulse carries seeds of redemption. The sculptures speak to the versatility and power of natural materials. Sand and lime, stone and mineral pigments speak to a variety of geographic regions of earth: Africa Asia, the Mediterranean, and the Americas. All these textures unify to convey Nature's timeless bounty in the wake of global warming. The technique I use in all my work is based on the ancient fresco-roughcast plaster, with layers of colors and overlapping thickness that give a three-dimensional texture. Normally, plaster is a heavy, rigid material. However, as my goal is always to achieve "lightness", I use the woven reeds or *canniccio* that farmers utilize to dry grapes in Tuscany, coffee beans in East Timor, cloves in Zanzibar, tea in Sri Lanka, rice in China, red chili in Africa. In India, the reed or *vetasa* is referred to as the "axis of the universe". In Japan's Shinto tradition, *chinowa* is a circle of reeds used in purification. The Persian poet Rumi describes the reed as light and hollow inside. He tells us to point its head to the wind, and "listen as it repeats the sound of 'God.' It is a flute and it carries a voice."

My reed sculptures are like totems. They accompany sixteen portraits that project the power of artistic expression to touch the human heart and conscience. I prefer to call these paintings "effigies" because the word "effigy" conjures up an image, often sacred. From the dawn of time, the human mind has observed natural phenomena. Patterns, born from a myriad of relationships, are like maps that allow us to journey into the landscape of a human face to find the path to the soul. Through their lifelong action and artistic calling, these sixteen men and women never lost sight of their most vulnerable brothers and sisters.

Each has served the greater good in the face of social injustice and the betrayals of human dignity: Miriam Makeba (South Africa), Umm Kulthum (Egypt), Okot p'Bitek (Uganda), Gong Li (China), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (Kenya), Maya Angelou (USA), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Edgar Morin (France), Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan), Pierre-Claver Akendengué (Gabon), Audrey Hepburn (UK), Joan Baez (USA), Satyajit Ray (India), Vasilij Kandinskij (Russia), Sebastião Salgado (Brazil), and Fatemeh Motamed-Arya (Iran). With today's destruction of forests, and pollution of Mother Earth's water, land, and air, the risks to humanity are even higher. But torches lit by the few can inspire multitudes.