On Saturday, March 29, 2025, at 12:46 p.m., Daniele Torcellini wrote:

Hello Clément,

To begin our conversation about your artistic practice, which for years now has seen you exploring the relationship between mosaic and photography, can you tell me where your interest in portraiture comes from?

On Sunday, March 30, 2025, at 12:21 p.m., Clément Mitéran wrote:

Hello Daniele,

If I have to go back a long way, to my childhood, it's a difficult question. My memories are a bit hazy. Perhaps portraiture was a form of representation that seemed to me to be the most complex and, in a certain sense, magical.

I was also fortunate to have a family history that included, among other things, objects that had been passed down to me. These included portraits of ancestors: 18th-century watercolors, drawings, and photographs from the 19th and 20th centuries. I believe that by spending time with these images, I learned to read portraits and see in them more than just a simple representation.

Later, I can also mention the first portrait I made at the end of my studies at the school in Spilimbergo. I chose to work on the portrait of my great-great-grandfather. I made a cutout of it and, a few years later, I remade the mosaic keeping the same scale, but as a full-length portrait. It is a photographic portrait that probably dates back to the early 1870s, and the remaining print is perhaps from the Nadar studio, or from Nadar himself, with whom he was friends. The photograph is marked by time, especially in the area of the sleeve, and my attention then focused on finding solutions to treat these indistinct surfaces in mosaic. This research into the degradation of the photographic image and its handling in mosaic was a starting point.

Subsequently, my interest in portraiture was renewed and enriched several times thanks to encounters with impossibilities and dead ends in my practice, in relation to the reception of portraiture in the contemporary era.

On Wednesday, July 9, at 4:10 p.m., Daniele Torcellini wrote:

I understand how stimulating it must have been to engage with these objects from your family history, and the photograph of your great-great-grandfather is very fascinating, as is the fact that it may be a photograph from the Nadar studio, with whom your great-great-grandfather was in friendly relations. We could say that your artistic practice has to do with photography for epigenetic reasons. Before exploring more deeply the relationships and tensions you solicit between techniques as different as photography and mosaic, I wonder how and why you came to mosaic. Were you looking for a medium with which to give greater concreteness to images?

On Thursday, July 10, 2025, at 3:44 p.m., Clément Mitéran wrote:

My first encounter with mosaics dates back to my childhood, during my trips to Italy, and in particular to Ravenna. I remember the profound effect that the discovery of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia had on me, or, perhaps more surprisingly and in my very early childhood, a piece of glass that was not perfectly flat, whose weave formed imperfect squares.

I cannot explain this attraction to this type of material composition.

But it was through this path that I became interested in the characteristics of mosaics, its history, applications, and symbolic value. Starting from there, what could have remained an amateur

attraction, a decorative practice, a hobby, or a professional activity took another direction, leading me to consider mosaics as a possible artistic object, endowed with its own characteristics, whose articulations seemed rich, even infinite, capable of interacting with my concerns.
Here, it will be necessary to make a choice in presenting these characteristics, since to evoke them all exhaustively would fill the pages of a book. First of all, the durability of mosaics places it in a temporality that is profoundly different from that of other media, especially today compared to more virtual ones. Its permanence leads it, willingly or unwillingly, to historicize what it represents and how it represents it. One could cite, for example, the *opus vermiculatum* mosaics of Pompeii, inspired by paintings from ancient Greece that have now disappeared. Yet these mosaics are not those paintings. This transposition of medium brings with it a change. However minimal, it is a fundamental act, because the way in which the medium conveys an object probably lays the foundations for an artistic act.
Secondly, the materiality of mosaics, which was already perceptible in the past, is now growing in proportion to the spread of virtual objects. A work created in mosaic must find its place in a tangible space. This involves something challenging and powerful, because it is difficult to avoid. Not without raising issues.
Lastly, the materials traditionally used to make mosaics carry strong symbolic meaning. Just think of the three main ones: marble, gold, and glass. It is clear what effect they were intended to produce in the past, which is why I believe it is sometimes desirable today to divert them from their commonly perceived symbolic meaning.
These different aspects of mosaics, among others, seemed to me to be closely related to my research on portraiture. They have nourished it and continue to feed it through multiple, varied, and, fortunately, sometimes unexpected pathways.

On Wednesday, July 16, at 8:00 a.m., Daniele Torcellini wrote:

The concreteness of materials such as stone, glass, and gold; the symbolic values they can embody; their potential to endure over time; their antagonistic nature with respect to the thinning and homogeneous smoothness without continuity of the materials we interact with daily to activate our digital devices. I believe these are some of the elements that have contributed, in recent years, to reawakening interest in mosaics in general. Mosaics should be associated with contemporary art not only, or not so much, because the constructive architecture of digital images, through pixels, recalls the fragmentation of the texture of a mosaic surface and the idea of having a few basic elements available that can be combined in various ways (and indivisible, to cite a broad cross-section of Western thought ranging from the atomist naturalist philosophy of Democritus, to the dawn of Newton's modern science, to 20th-century physics with atomic models or the search for subatomic particles).
Mosaics can be compared to contemporary art with a contrapuntal spirit. Mosaics contrast the speed, ephemerality, fragmentation, and liquid modernity of the non-places dear to Baumann with concreteness, durability, recomposition, and qualification of places for experiences that have to do with being in a specific moment. In other words, to use terms well known in the world of art criticism and, in particular, in the context of theoretical reflections on the consequences of the introduction of photographic techniques, the ‘here and now’ referred to by Walter Benjamin. Before delving into these philosophical hints, which I believe are useful for framing your work and the tensions between photography and mosaic that I mentioned earlier and which we are now exploring, can you tell us something about the series of works that preceded these latest works?

On Thursday, July 17, 2025, at 3:43 p.m., Clément Mitéran wrote:

I have indeed thought of dividing these earlier works into three main series, which I can evoke according to their chronological order of appearance, even though they overlapped in time.

My first portraits were mosaics made from photographs. Creating them allowed me to find solutions specific to mosaics in this exercise of transposing the image photography/mosaic. These “Figures de la mythologie moderne et contemporaine”, accompanied by a few commissions, were part of an ancient tradition of portraiture in general, and mosaic portraiture in particular. I was then able to see how much the perception of this type of portrait had changed. A mosaic portrait, with its strong materiality – whose durability is also instinctively perceived – born from in-depth introspection carried out with the subjects represented (living or dead!), has now become almost unacceptable. Extremely stereotypical, personality-less, virtual self-representations, destined to be made public globally through social networks, are now integrated. The portrait as I described it earlier, elaborate, durable, intended for private dissemination, provokes epidermal reactions, which curiously focus on suspicions of egocentrism. This is a new development that shakes the age-old foundations that have defined portraiture until now, and which is gaining ground all the more rapidly and powerfully because it goes unnoticed. I find all this extremely stimulating and fertile: I have made it my subject of research.

The “Figurations anonymes” represent artists who express themselves partially or totally through the medium of mosaic. These are analog photographic prints on white glass or white gold mosaics. The subjects are completely anonymous: I do not mention their names in the titles of the works and their representation is evanescent. Only the surface of the mosaic can evoke the unique work of each of these artists and allow the most expert to identify them. Their photographic identity, already degraded by the irregular support of the mosaic, will disappear within a few centuries, a few millennia before the mosaic itself undergoes slow degradation.

Ultimately, “Consecratio/Abolitio nominis” reuses photographs of works from the previous series and combines them with the images used to make them. The result is digitally printed on new surfaces in marble mosaic or marble slabs, and has a rather indecipherable result, which you described in the critical text of the exhibition “Rappresentazioni” as a process of autophagy. After several requests from private individuals for portraits for the series “Figurations anonymes”, requests that I refused, it seemed to me that the meaning of this work was largely lost on the general public. It was therefore a question of insisting, coloring the images, as one would color an old war documentary, to bring this story and its protagonists closer to us, while attacking these images with solvents, hammers, sandpaper, chisels, drills, etc., and then restoring them, sometimes.

On Sunday, July 27, at 6:14 p.m., Daniele Torcellini wrote:

Benjamin, in his famous essay on technical reproducibility, writes that art is received in different ways, two of which, mutually opposed, are particularly significant: cult value and exhibition value. Art was created to respond to ritual, magical, spiritual, and cult needs. While originally it was more important for a work to exist than to be seen, over the course of history artistic practices have become emancipated from ritual and opportunities for exhibiting have increased. A half-length portrait is more exhibitable than a statue of a deity installed in a temple; a painted panel is more exhibitable than a mosaic or a fresco, writes Benjamin. And with photography, finally, the value of exhibibility completely dominates, as it is a medium that intrinsically lends itself to the multiplication of images.

I make this remark because I find Benjamin's reference to mosaics and photography particularly interesting, as two opposing poles on an axis that ranges from the needs of worship to those of the display of a work of art. We could also paraphrase this differently by thinking of the fact that mosaics

extend the work of art in time and photography in space, to frame your work, in which the tensions between mosaic and photography are explored both from the point of view of the nature of the media and from the point of view of the symbolic associations and chain of meanings, even deferred ones, to which the two media refer. But that is not all. Benjamin believes that one of the consequences of the technical reproducibility of the work of art is the loss of its aura, that is, the possibility of confronting the uniqueness of an artwork, with its concrete presence in a defined space and time. However, if in photography the value of displayability begins to completely replace cultural value, Benjamin writes, "the latter does not retreat without resistance. It occupies a last trench, which is the face of man. It is no coincidence that the portrait is at the center of early photographs. In the cult of remembering distant or deceased loved ones, the cultural value of the picture finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, from the first photographs, the aura emanates for the last time"[1].
In your work, you constantly deal with the presence and absence of the face, with the loss and recovery of identity, and you do so by combining mosaics and photography. You have also done so in this latest series of works, which you have presented in the form of an installation. You set up the mosaics in a very specific space and time. You deliberately limited access to one person at a time. You provided a candle to illuminate the works and the space itself. I would say that you wanted to recreate a highly sacred, albeit secular, experience, not as a nostalgic evocation of ancient glories but as a critical reflection on our current visual horizon, as you yourself write, inundated with selfies or photographic portraits that display stereotypical faces and bodies and pass before our eyes without leaving any trace. Before leaving the word to you, asking you to recount how this experience developed, I would like to make one last observation. For Benjamin, the consequences of technical reproducibility are different. The work loses its sacredness and its aura, but gains the possibility that images may have a political, collective, and revolutionary impact. Does your artistic action, suspended between the *hic et nunc* of the installation and the possibility of unlimited reproduction of the images and videos that document it and illustrate this very catalog via the web, have political or social implications?

On Monday, July 28, 2025, at 4:09 p.m., Clément Mitéran wrote:
I have long thought that claiming political significance for art was excessive presumption. A few years ago, I would have gasped when listening to Deleuze, when he stated in “Abécédaire” that philosophy "prevents stupidity from being as great as it would be if there were no philosophy; that is its splendor. We don't realize what it would be like, just as if there were no arts, but the vulgarity of people... you know... When we say [...] to create is to resist, it is effective, I mean, the world would not be what it is if there were no art, because then people would no longer be able to hold themselves together". Although I am still not entirely convinced by Deleuze's somewhat surprising statement, I must admit that I have nevertheless evolved on this point. Faced with the current social and political world, perhaps artistic practice serves at least to keep a light alive.
Sure, it is flickering. On the edge. But it is still something.

However, your question and your references to Benjamin force me to take a certain distance and consider things as they are today, almost a century after his famous publication. The producibility and reproducibility of images has developed exponentially in recent decades. At the same time, the

[1] W. Benjamin, *L’opera d’arte nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, Einaudi, Turin 1998, p. 27; or. ed. Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, drei studien zur Kunstsoziologie, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Maine, c1955.

production and perception of portraiture have undergone transformations, which I perceive as a renewed iconoclastic movement, stripping it of almost all its attributes, of all its aura (except, as always, in its last refuges). This evolution is accompanied by another intensification: the images produced and disseminated today are practically destined for single use, becoming immediately disposable. This is due both to the incessant scrolling on social media, where they disappear as soon as they appear, and to the far from certain reliability of hardware supports. As you also mention, these images extend into space, now also virtual, and last even less. But, as Michel Poivert pointed out to me, and to put it another way, there is a link between the photographic utopia of image reproducibility and the utopia of a mosaic that aims to make painting “eternal”, according to the expression attributed to Ghirlandaio. This antagonistic link continues to grow stronger, and the phenomenon described by Benjamin remains extraordinarily relevant; indeed, it has amplified.
This is where we stand.

The contemporary world is also preparing to undergo other profound transformations, which, in some respects, echo Benjamin's analyses and which, in my opinion, need to be considered at this stage.
I will thus attempt a prospective exercise. From the point of view of production and reproduction, not only of images but also of matter, there is no reason, at least on a technological level (leaving aside economic and ecological issues), why humanoid robots equipped with AI could not, for example, autonomously create a Roman mosaic anywhere in the coming years. This will probably redefine the boundaries between craftsmanship, artistic craftmanship, and art. In essence, anything based on established rules that can be transferred to a machine can be reproduced by it. And these rules can be combined and mixed, offering, as is already the case, support for artistic production. Yet there is clearly something that eludes us and is unlikely to be replaced: the sensitivity and subjectivity of human beings, that is, of those who cultivate a passion for art and those who are artists. Only they, with these particular predispositions, can bring an artwork to life.

Starting from this, and considering the state of the portrait I have described, it seemed extremely appealing to me to attempt a very minimalist approach, returning to the origin, to the myth of Pliny. The outline of the shadow projected by a candle on a wall, traced on that wall by a young woman whose lover was about to leave, in order to preserve his image, gives life to both painting and portrait. This very minimalist aspect of representation seemed necessary to me today. And even more than that: I wasn't thinking of a form created by a body that would hide a projected light, but rather an animated double of the individual, a persistent immaterial memory, inspired by a definition of the shadow present in ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, and the Middle East.
The portrait could thus become an exploration of both material and immaterial identity, and this approach allowed me to reintroduce a dimension of wonder with regard to the act of portraiture itself, fully embracing its fascinating and enigmatic nature.
The wavering light of the candle then brought the single illumination of a person visiting the installation, without whom it would not have existed. Just as there are no mosaics or photographs without light. The precariousness of the lighting also became that of the portrait, of the animated double.

As for the tension and possible political and social implications generated by the very existence of such an exhibition between the *hic et nunc* of the installation and its presence in our contemporary temporality made up of reproduced and disseminated images, I must say that I placed myself above all in the position of a curious spectator of the effects that might be generated, and I was not

disappointed. I was just a little concerned that it might be perceived as a spectacle, but fortunately that was not the case.
It was certainly a first experience, especially in Ravenna, where, perhaps for the first time in about a century, mosaics were seen illuminated by candlelight. I think I can already recognize some effects, although it would be interesting to repeat this experience elsewhere, because the location and the type of audience are certainly important.
First of all, finding oneself alone, in silence, with only a candle, in an exhibition space that is no longer a white cube, did not leave one indifferent. The attention paid and the intimate relationship with the works on display constituted, for most of the public, an experience of great intensity, a slowing down that, it seems to me, many of the exhibitions mounted today are no longer able to produce. I will always remember my visit to the Vatican Museums, filled with people taking a leisurely walk, sometimes stopping for a quick shot with their smartphones at an “Instagrammable” artwork. A veritable hell on earth. Perhaps I managed to shine a flickering light on the margins. But, once again, it is still something.
Afterwards, there were relatively few photos or videos of the installation posted on social media. Perhaps the exhibition format encouraged concentration; perhaps the low light available combined with the sensitivity of smartphone cameras discouraged some impulses. These two aspects – attention to oneself, one's feelings, and to the works, and the difficulty of transforming them into reproducible images – constitute, in my opinion, the main social and political effects of such an installation.
What remains are the catalog, the photographs, and the videos that were made, which, in addition to the communication obligations related to the exhibition, should, in my opinion, serve above all as a reminder of an experience that is fundamentally unrepeatable, even by the same person, from one visit to the next.

On Monday, August 25, at 1:16 a.m., Daniele Torcellini wrote:

One of the most significant historical and artistic contributions on the subject of shadows is Victor Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow.* From the origins of painting to Pop Art. Stoichita examines the symbolic, philosophical, and cultural meanings of the shadow, which are rooted in myth and run through literature and art history: the shadow is seen as the origin of painting and knowledge in the Antiquity; it is absent in sacred representations of the Middle Ages; it is useful for representing an illusory and perspective space in the Renaissance and a dramatic space with strong contrasts of light and shadow in the Baroque period; but the shadow is also an ambiguous and uncanny absence/presence and metaphor for identity; a double animated of the subject or such that it can reveal its truest essence in the 18th century; a metaphor for the unconscious; a precedent for photography and then, with the latter, it has the possibility of being reproduced; it is an ambiguous, unsettling double that acquires its own autonomy in contemporary art, starting with the shadows of the ready-mades that Duchamp stages. In your installation, many of these references seem to emerge and contaminate each other. Walking around with a candle in your hand, in your installation, you find yourself in the evocative position of someone illuminating shining and iridescent mosaic surfaces, with the whole range of glows that derive from them and that invest and modulate the surrounding space, creating a shadow of yourself behind you. But not only that. Also illuminated – as if searching for traces of identity that are irretrievably lost, ambiguous, present/absent, animated – are spectral silhouettes outlined both through the arrangement of the tiles and, in particular, through the use of photosensitive emulsions that you have blackened using analog photographic techniques. If mosaic is the realm of light and analog photography primarily produces shadows where it receives light, your work seems to me to bring a new and meaningful complexity to this

polarized relationship, so as to make it the site for a subversion of our habitual and comfortable way of confronting the image of the human face, our own and that of others, through the microscopic grid of backlit pixels of our devices.

On Saturday, August 30, at 6:20 p.m., Clément Mitéran wrote:

Without a doubt, it is both the relationship with the image and the relationship with the face that is disrupted, compared to contemporary modes of production and perception. The use of the chemigram, which frees me from the photographic negative, allows me, from a practical point of view, to distance myself from a “realistic” concern in the production of the image. I can freely use the photographic emulsion to bring out the grays and blacks, or leave gaps, which will interact with the pattern of the mosaic. To a certain extent, I am not particularly interested in the image itself. It is rather in this relationship between mosaic and photographic material that these portraits are constructed.

Nevertheless, the very use of photography tends to make us perceive the representation in a realistic way. Photography was born in a context that pushed towards this goal of realism, and our culture still associates it with this idea, even unconsciously. Perhaps our brains are wired to perceive the type of representation that photography produces in this way.

Essentially, I move away from the image, from realism, I construct a portrait with matter and, at the same time, the desire to reconstruct a trace, to fill in the ambiguities and absences, belongs to the viewer, and is all the more intense the more they are in contact with the photography.

I thought there was a possible way to make the portrait exist, that is, to bring out an identity, despite the strong opposition and aesthetic barriers that exist today to counteract this desire.

The absence of a “comfortable” image has the effect of destabilizing our ability to interpret, and shifts the artistic object produced into another register: it gives it another status.

In addition to Stoichita's reading, on the good advice of Eleonora Savorelli, an additional source of reflection was provided by Aaron Tugendhaft's *The Idols of ISIS, from Assyria to the Internet*. I was interested then, and still am, in past and contemporary forms of iconoclasm. While some of these methods are repeated almost identically thousands of years later, there have also been some developments. The point that I think is important to emphasize is the constant tension between iconophilia and iconoclasm, even if there are sometimes periods of stability that may lead us to believe that agreement on these issues is possible. As an aside, our civilization is marked by a surprising unawareness of its iconoclastic impulses.

In any case, it is always the sacred status, object of the representation, that creates problems. Music, painting, sculpture, etc., are accused of diverting attention from the sacred object, in that they constitute images, intellectual if not material ones, that are not properly that sacred object. They divert, in the literal sense.

Hence, my portraits, devoid of any clear intention to produce an image, shift the status of sacredness, normally attributed to their subject, particularly in the case of portraits, towards the material or intellectual objects they constitute. Rather than diverting attention from the sacred, I have sought, by creating a work without an image, to divert sacredness in favor of the portrait as a genre, and mosaic and photography as media. Thus they are sacralized, as they are devoid of the Idea of the image.

It should be noted, for those who have not seen the works, that the absence of an image is obviously not a material absence of the work, nor is it the absence of a portrait, or a complete shift to abstraction.

But beyond a non-mobilization of technical means that would allow the production of a realistic and immediately recognizable face, the image becomes, in my creative process, an accessory, pushed into the background. The matter and its use, which can probably be defined as the “medium”, are at the center of these works and constitute, I believe, a starting point for their understanding.
The sacredness I am referring to is not religious in nature, nor is it linked to the hypothesis of a Platonic Idea, but rather, to borrow a Latin definition, it concerns that which cannot be touched without becoming contaminated, or without contaminating. It seems to me that this also corresponds well to the status of mosaic as a medium, to portraiture in our contemporary world, to experimental photography.
The magical aspect of the sacred also echoes Stoichita's hypothesis on Pliny the Elder's transcription of the myth of the birth of painting. The latter would not have considered an approach linked to archaic Greece or ancient Egypt (and more broadly to the Middle East) which sees the terracotta object, resulting from the tracing of the portrait of the beloved, brought to the temple after the announcement of his death, transforming the object into the animated double of that individual.
That said, to get closer to the meaning, influences, and implications you mentioned, I don't think there is a better way to enjoy it than to engage with this installation directly, physically.