

**ANRI SALA**

IN THE MIDST OF OLD MASTERS

Kunstmuseum Basel

April 4 – September 15, 2024



*Esther Schipper*

## Anri Sala



Anri Sala was born in 1974 in Tirana, Albania. He received his BA in Painting and Sculpture from the National Academy of Arts Tirana, studied Video at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and completed post-graduate studies in Film Directing at Le Fresnoy–Studio National des Arts Contemporains in Tourcoing. The artist lives and works in Berlin.

Sala has received the CODAWorx Public Art Award (2021), the Mario Merz Prize Nomination (2015), the Vincent Van Gogh Award (2014), the 10th Benesse Prize (2013), the Absolut Art Award (2011), and the Young Artist Prize at the Venice Biennale (2001). He has taken part in many group exhibitions and biennials, including the Yokohama Triennale (2017); 12th Havana Biennial (2015), the Sharjah Biennial 11 (2013), the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012), dOCUMENTA (13) (2012), the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010), the 8th, 4th, 2nd Berlin Biennale (2014, 2006, 2001) and the Venice Biennale.

In 2013, Anri Sala represented France in the 55th Venice Biennale with his exhibition **Ravel Ravel Unravel**.

Anri Sala's œuvre explores the relationships between music and narrative, architecture and film, interleaving qualities of different media in both complex and intuitive ways to produce works in which one medium takes on the qualities of another. His practice encompasses sound and video installation, film, sculpture, photographs, drawings, books, scores and, as Mark Godfrey has noted, "the exhibitions wherein individual works are arranged into ensembles."

Recent solo exhibitions include: **Anri Sala – In the midst of Old Masters**, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel (2024); **AS YOU GO**, Winsing Art Center, Taipei (2022); **Time No Longer**, Bourse de Commerce | Pinault Collection, Paris (2022); **Anri Sala. Transfigured**, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo (2022); **Anri Sala**, Kunsthaus Bregenz (2021); **Time No Longer**, Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern, Houston (2021); **Anri Sala: The Last Resort**, MUDAM, Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg (2020); **AS YOU GO (Châteaux en Espagne)**, Centro Botín, Santander (2019–20); **Anri Sala. Le Temps coudé**, MUDAM, Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg (2019–20); **AS YOU GO**, Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2019); **Clocked Perspective**, Fundación Jumex, Public Plaza, Mexico City (2017); **The Last Resort**, 33rd Kaldor Public Art Projects, Observatory Hill Rotunda, Sydney (2017); **Anri Sala**, Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2017); **All of a Tremble**, Benesse Art Site, Teshima Seawall House, Teshima (2016).

Sala's work is held in many public collections including: ARoS – Aarhus Art Museum, Aarhus; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; Kunsthaus Zürich; LUMA Foundation, Zurich; Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Museum Folkwang, Essen; National Museum of Osaka; Pinault Collection, Venice; Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Tate Gallery, London; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Ishikawa Collection, Okayama.

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Cover:  
**Legenda Auerea Inversa** (VII, fragment 2), 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 63 x 40 x 4.8 cm (AS 137)

## IN THE MIDST OF OLD MASTERS

How do the most recent works of Albanian video and installation artist Anri Sala, born in 1974, situate him among Old-Master paintings of the 15th and early 16th centuries? By his revival of two, if not three, early-modern craft techniques.

On the one hand, Sala paints al fresco here, i.e. on fine, fresh lime plaster (intonaco) that has not yet fully dried, but which is only the thin top layer of a multi-layered wall surface. The work **Surface to Air XIII (Cipollino/Quasi pietra)**, 2023, provides an example for this structure based on layering. Of course, Sala does not fresco immovable walls, but rather creates transportable panels, with aluminum honeycomb panels from the construction industry serving as supports. Fresco painting is a technique that the Italian masters of the early and high Renaissance in particular brought to perfection. Names such as Masaccio, Ghirlandaio, Raphael, and Michelangelo come to mind. However, art sometimes forges its very own bonds, spanning centuries in an instant.

In his search for a suitable point of reference, Sala chose another of the great Italians: the formal, meditative and always somewhat mysterious Piero della Francesca (c. 1410/20–1492), of whom there is hardly a painting that does not seem like a film still *avant la lettre*, full of vivid observation, but nevertheless frozen for eternity as if by inner necessity. (The philosopher among film directors Andrei Tarkovsky loved Piero, as can be seen in **Nostalghia** from 1983).

The two works by Sala in this room that are more modest in format – just as annotations are usually set in a smaller font – but draw from a work by Piero of relatively gigantic dimensions: his most extensive fresco cycle with the legend of the Holy Cross in San Francesco in Arezzo, which was begun in 1453 and was probably only completed in the 1460s. Sala deconstructs the narrative of Piero's cycle by picking out individual sections and focusing on them as if with the viewfinder of a camera. The frescoes shown here include two details from the Identification and Veneration of the True Cross, although Sala modifies them significantly: The hands of the woman from St. Helena's entourage are rotated by 90° and, like the heads of the two women behind them in his other painting, are reversed in color as in a photographic negative. This yields a threefold reversal: large becomes small, vertical becomes horizontal, positive becomes negative.

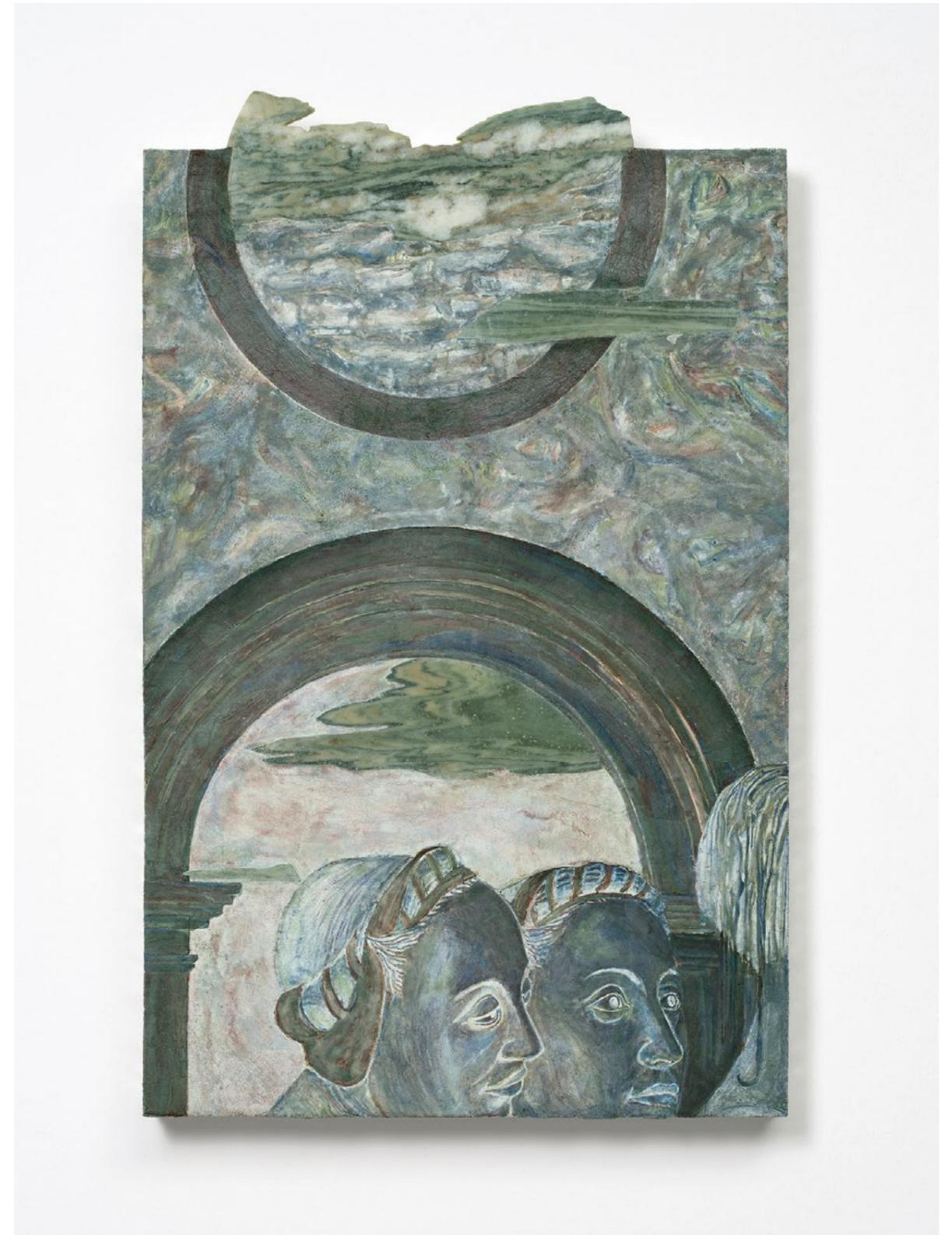
Sala thus adopts an artistic gesture that has a longer tradition. Said gesture could be described as an inverted quotation. For example, Rodin makes a gateway to hell out of bronze because the opposite, a gateway to paradise in the same medium, Ghiberti's Baptistery Doors, already enjoys fame in Florence. Henri Rousseau portrays himself in the pose of Gilles, a rococo icon by Watteau, dressed entirely in black, because Gilles himself already gleams in snow-white in the Louvre. And so on.



Piero della Francesca, **The Discovery and Proof of the True Cross**. From the cycle **The Legend of the True Cross** (detail) c. 1453/66, fresco, St. Francis, Arezzo

Anri Sala did not borrow the fresco technique from the paintings in Arezzo. That would hardly have been possible: the pigments dissolved in water sinter indissolubly with the extremely chalky fine plaster layer, which accounts for their fundamental permanence. How they were applied cannot be determined in front of the object; Sala learned the technical skills for this at the National Academy of Arts in Tirana (Albania). Almost 30 years later, the artist traveled to Naples with those skills in his luggage.

Looking at the paintings up close, the structure created by Sala with his brush seems strangely familiar. The way in which the artist loosely blends green, pink, violet and ochre tones in rather diluted paint into one another and on top of one another here recalls the colored plaster surfaces of baroque and rococo interiors that were intended to look like marble. Such imitations, known as



**Legenda Auerea Inversa (VII, fragment 2)**, 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 63 x 40 x 4.8 cm (AS 137)

stucco marble, were particularly popular from the 17th to the 19th century; it is said that they were sometimes more expensive than real marble.

The latter, however, appears as a further element in Sala's works. Carefully hand-picked marble slabs not only stand out vividly in the relief of the paint layer, but even break the rectangular outline of the pictures at the edges. On the one hand, their stone textures are well integrated into the painting, in which they by no means appear as completely foreign bodies. At the same time, their whorled patterns stand out noticeably from Sala's brushstrokes despite their similar coloration, creating an island effect.

This brings us to the third historical technique to be mentioned here: exploiting decorative stones for pictorial effect by using a particular stone, selected for its texture, as a support and painting it only partially. It was particularly popular in the 17th century; Jacques Stella (1596–1657) and Frans Francken the Younger (1581–1642), for example, made use of it. Artistic form and masterfully found natural form complement each other and are interlocked in a meaningful way. The basis of this interlocking is the illusionistic reading of the picture surface. Stella's partially unpainted lapis lazuli reproduced here serves as a night sky; a whitish vein of calcite in the gemstone can be seen as the Milky Way and as clouds in the moonlight, while the golden pyrite speckles behind the figures are a twinkling of stars. A border around the precious lapis lazuli oval made of much cheaper slate sets the earthy tone for the soil and the trees.

One other example: Johann König (1586–1642) uses the cloudy textures of an agate slab to depict the Red Sea, which in the biblical account of the miracle allows its waters to recede before the Israelites and then drown their pursuers, Pharaoh's soldiers, in it. The fundamental characteristic of figuration connects Sala's works with their early-modern predecessors: they are not non-figurative paintings, but rather represent something. The pictures from the **Surface to Air** series show cloud cover from above, as seen from an airplane and as Sala systematically captures it photographically during his travels. Subtitles such as **Morning** or **Afternoon** indicate the time of day of such an overflight and very realistically the different lighting moods that result.

In line with this, the title **Surface to Air** takes up the Renaissance theorem of the image as a cross-section through the visual pyramid and thus as a segment of three-dimensional reality: The surface of the plaster becomes a fictitious air space by virtue of what is reproduced on it. Yet there is also an inherent sense of paradoxical connotation, as "surface to air" is also the military term for ground-based air defense, which is intended to make the point of view above the clouds, on which the images are based, impossible to access.



Johann König, **The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea**. Door of the Art Cabinet of King Gustav II Adolf, c. 1625/31, oil on agate, Gustavianum, University Museum, Uppsala

The marble incrustations fulfill two functions in Sala's frescoes: On the one hand, they are a continuation of the painting and complement it. Realistically, they could be interpreted partly as the fleeting wisps of cloud that pass by the cabin window outside, and partly as the fine ice crystals that have formed on the pane – both common perceptions that one often experiences when traveling by plane. But anyone who travels like this and gathers such impressions has something to tell us: here, an additional dimension, that of narration, opens up in the works. On the other hand, the stones interrupt the rhythmic brushwork of the painting; they signal disturbances and thus quote without actually 'depicting' them – the typical flaws of historical wall paintings, mostly unintentional losses due to the vicissitudes of time. Sala's creations thus reflect yet another dimension: that of temporality.

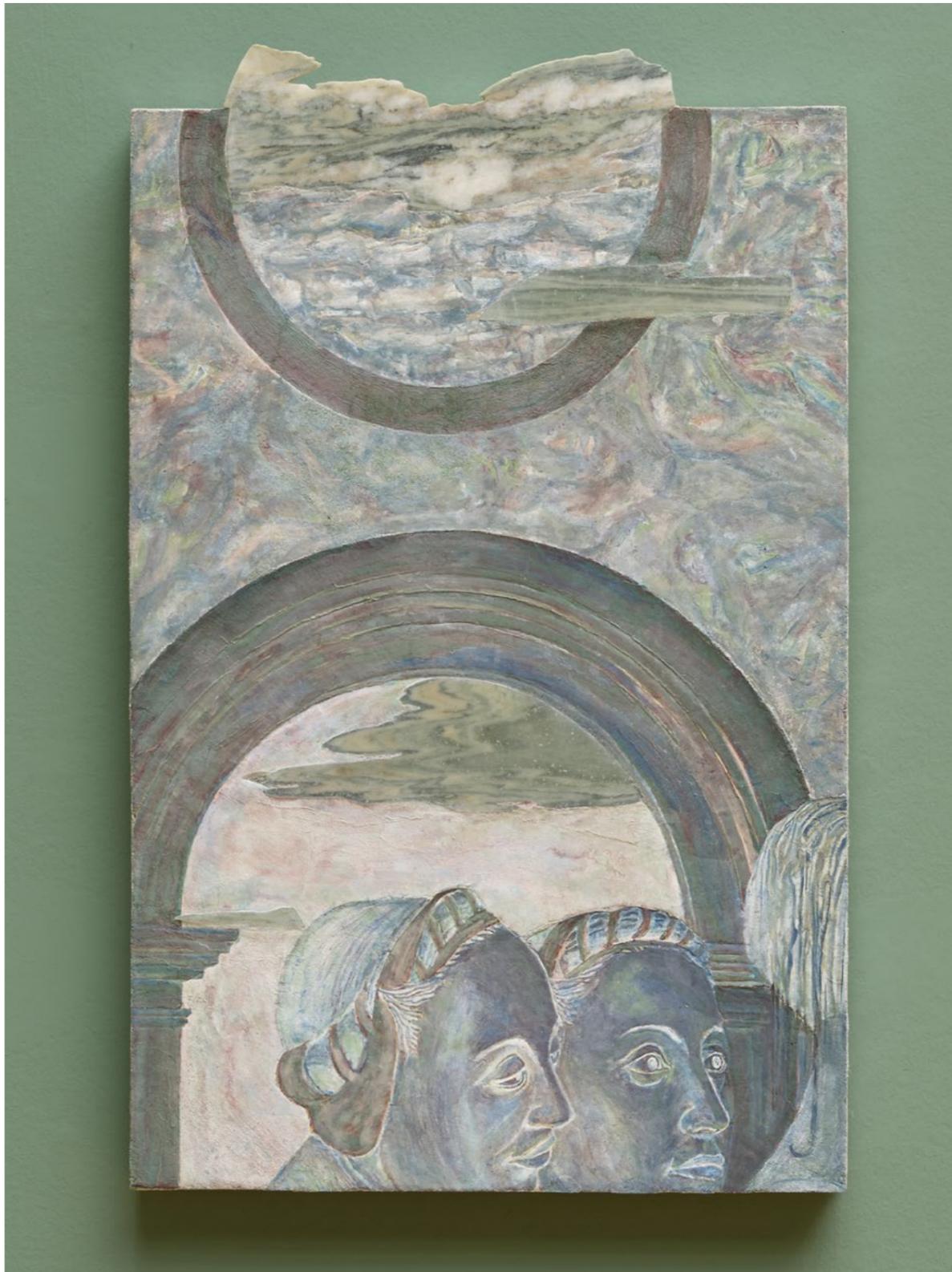
– Bodo Brinkmann and Jasmin Sumpf for Kunstmuseum Basel  
(translated by Gregory Clark)



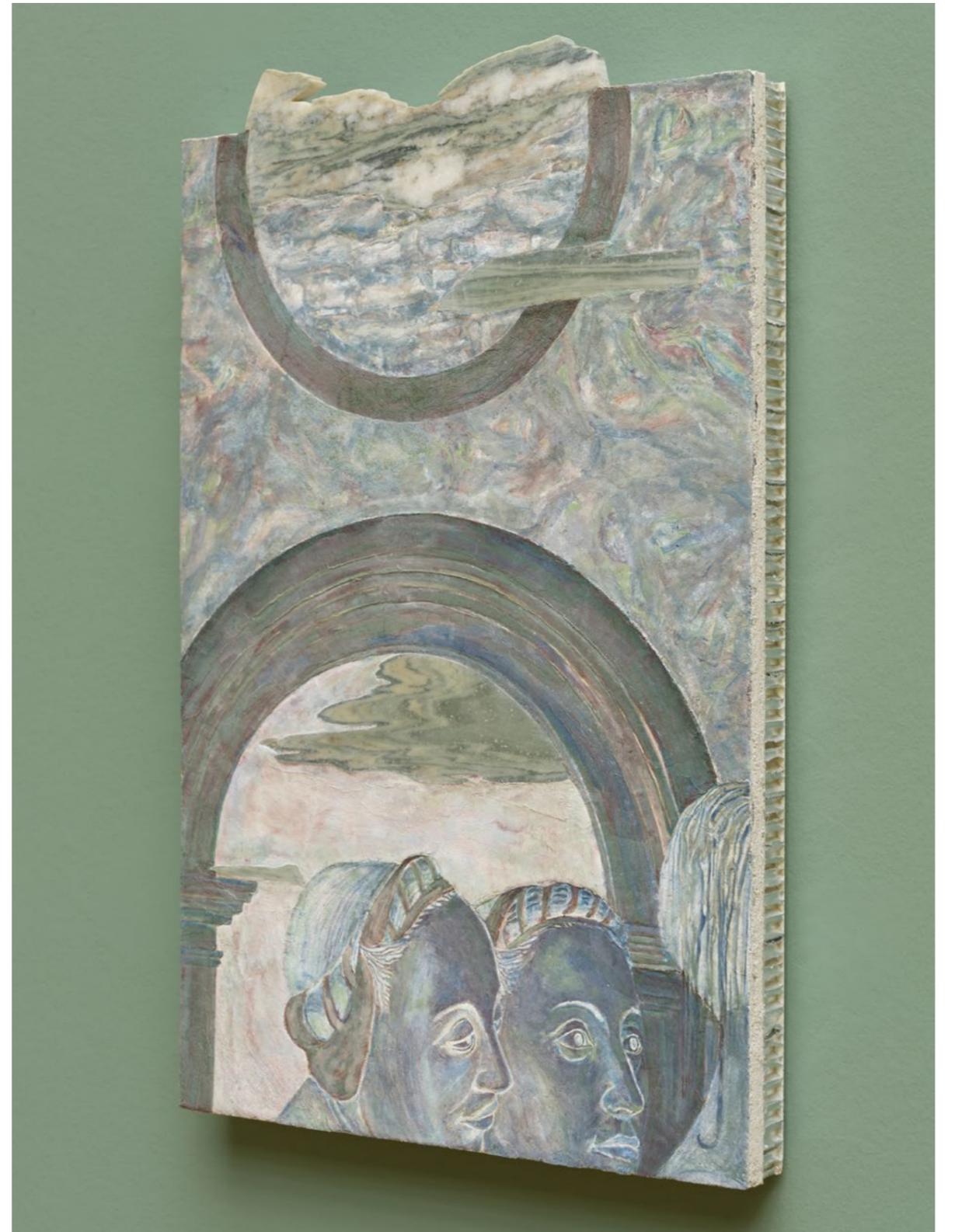
Exhibition view: Anri Sala, **In the Midst of Old Masters**, Kunstmuseum Basel (2024)



Video: In Conversation with Anri Sala. Commissioned by Schaulager and Kunstmuseum Basel



**Legenda Auerea Inversa** (VII, fragment 2), 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 63 x 40 x 4.8 cm (AS 137)



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Exhibition view: Anri Sala, *In the Midst of Old Masters*, Kunstmuseum Basel (2024)



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AVAILABLE WORKS (WORKS IN SERIES)



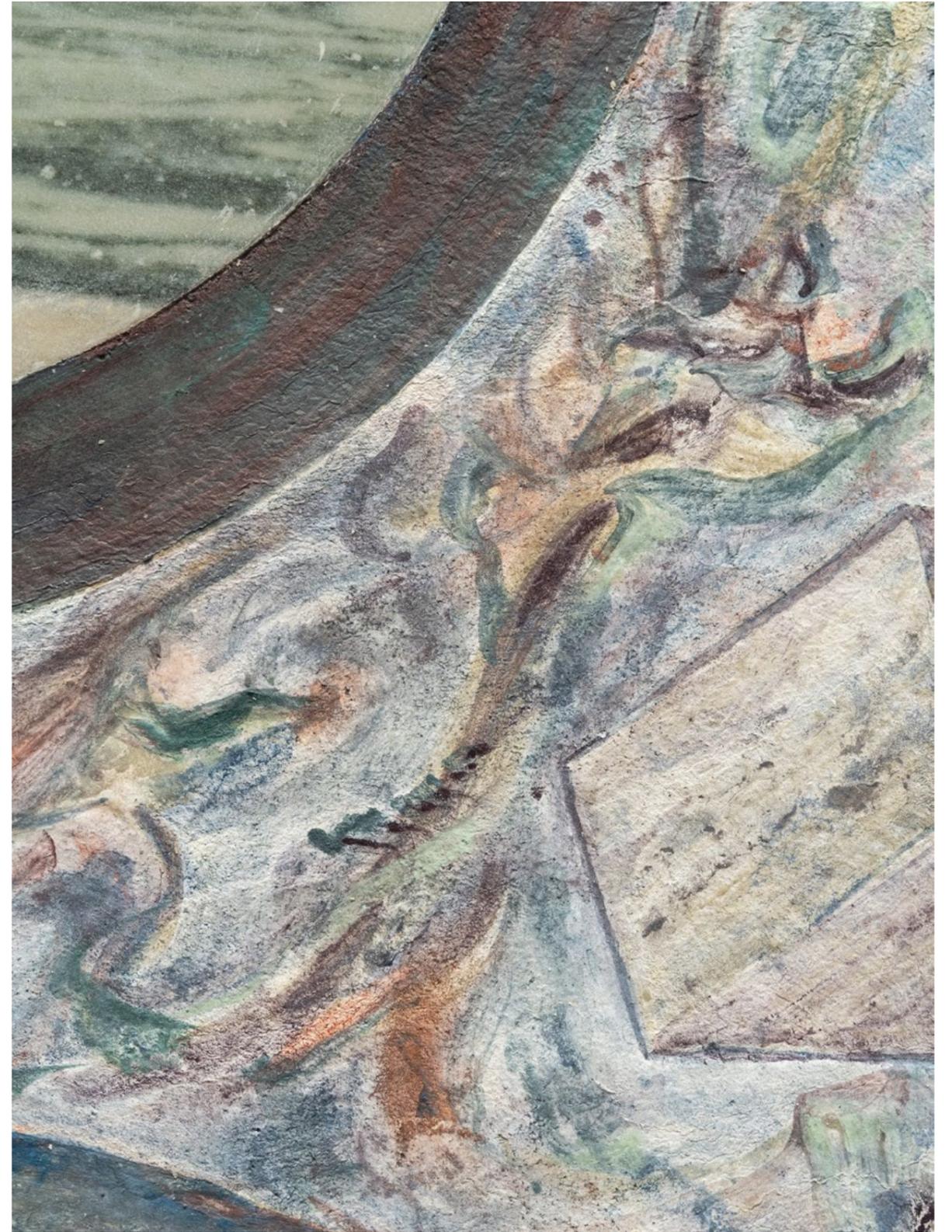
**Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 1)**, 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 60 x 40 x 4,8 cm (23 5/8 x 15 3/4 x 1 7/8 in) (AS 144)



**Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 1)**, 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 60 x 40 x 4,8 cm (23 5/8 x 15 3/4 x 1 7/8 in) (AS 144)



Detail: **Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 1)**, 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 60 x 40 x 4,8 cm (23 5/8 x 15 3/4 x 1 7/8 in) (AS 144)



Detail: **Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 1)**, 2023, fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 60 x 40 x 4,8 cm (23 5/8 x 15 3/4 x 1 7/8 in) (AS 144)



**Surface to Air i, ii, iii (Cipollino / Afternoon Slightly After)**, 2023, fresco paintings, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 3 parts, 17 x 21 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 1 5/8 in), 17 x 21 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 1 5/8 in), 17 x 23,5 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 9 1/4 x 1 5/8 in) (AS 143)



**Surface to Air i, ii, iii (Cipollino / Afternoon Slightly After)**, 2023, fresco paintings, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 3 parts, 17 x 21 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 1 5/8 in), 17 x 21 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 1 5/8 in), 17 x 23,5 x 4 cm (6 3/4 x 9 1/4 x 1 5/8 in) (AS 143)



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