BERLIN

From Mark to Meaning: 'Empreintes' at Les Filles du Calvaire

by Paige Miller // July 22, 2025

There isn't an exact translation in English for the French word empreintes, which refers to any impression—from a footprint to a trace to a fingerprint to a stamp. It's essentially an impression that lingers. In 1977, the Centre Pompidou held a show on the same subject, entitled 'L'empreinte,' but the current exhibition at Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire takes the concept one step further, examining the imprint as it moves from gesture to language ("du geste au langage"). Gestures are signifiers of emotion and a language of their own: in the theater, at the ballet and across a crowded room. Hands are waved in excitement, fingers crossed in hope, knees buckled in grief. The imprint is what remains: a crimson lipstick stain on a napkin, a wet footprint on summer pavement, the ashes of a cigarette—traces of time and the human body. It's this concept that curator Pierre El Khoury brings the work of Alexandre Fandard, Mariana Hahn and Giovanni Leonardo Bassan together to explore. The three artists come from international contexts, but all call Paris their home. From canvas to copper, clay, cushions and military blankets, their multimaterial practices show how gestures translate memory and movement to visual language.



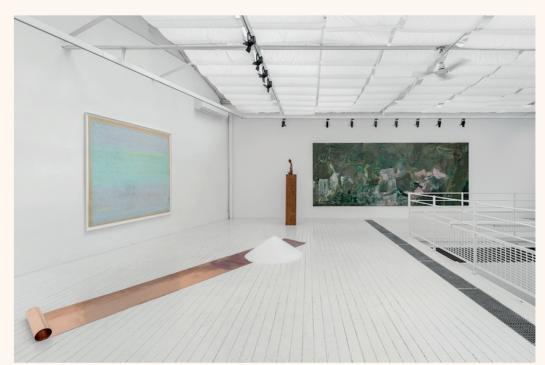
· 'Empreintes: du geste au langage,' 2025, installation view // Courtesy of Les Filles du Calvaire

A three-walled structure stands in the center of the downstairs room, light filtering in from above. It's a contemporary grotto, with a bright-red, three-legged, wounded *chien fer* (or "iron dog") standing watch. In Martinique today, these dogs are known as guardians, spiritually protecting souls, but in the past they were used to hunt down enslaved people who had escaped. Alexandre Fandard's work speaks to the imprints of his Martinique origins and colonial history. In dialogue with his works are Giovanni Leonardo Bassan's intimate oil paintings on wood. These works are snapshots of time, the cushions some are mounted on are another surface where the human body leaves a fleeting dent.



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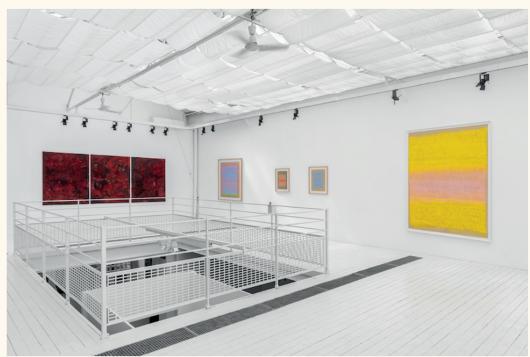
Upstairs, the airy space is dominated by works of a monumental scale. Mariana Hahn's evocative sky blue and yellow 'Namen' greets us. The German word for "name" has been scrawled so many times that it's abstracted. The looping cascade of her handwriting simultaneously excites and calms, rhythmically breaking and swelling across the page. Below it, rolled out across the white floor is a copper and salt work—Hahn grew up near salt mines in Germany and regularly uses the mineral in her practice. Across from all this, Giovanni Leonardo Bassan's painterly poeticism is on full display in the verdant landscape dominating the back wall. It could be the urban underground cruising scene in the Bois de Boulogne, but it could be anywhere: there are cacti, a cowboy hat and palm trees. Nothing is explicit, but it's winked at. Figures fade in and out. A pastel hand grasps a mobile phone—a reference to the contemporary. It's an imaginary landscape of reverie, firmly rooted in the realities of today.



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In the 1977 Centre Pompidou show, a series of Ugo Mulas' photographs depicting Jasper Johns pressing his head against a piece of paper was mounted on a wall next to the resulting image, 'Skin' (1964)—the imprinting and the imprint shown in relation to one another. So too, is Fandard's video performance in visual conversation with his poem and painting on the far wall. As a visual artist and choreographer, Fandard is no stranger to the power of gesture and movement. In the video, paint splatters mix with gravel as the artist's whip gashes the raw, red canvas. An accompanying poem juxtaposes the colonial histories of Martinique and France. Up close, the painting surface is full of debris, but it's not as dark as it seems. Pops of pink are peeking out. There is light to be found in the darkness, after all.

Hahn's work too, explores this metaphorical and material speck of light. Panels of black canvas with small spots of blue, like open wounds, rest upon a copper plate (unfolded it matches the artist's body height). It's a *nigredo*: alchemical darkness that is the root of all transformation, with a blue speck of light reaching in from deep suffering. Hahn is a bit of an alchemist herself—in other copper works she lies down coated in sweat and salt, leaving a whisper of a trace that takes a few weeks to show. Time is what transforms an ephemeral gesture into a lasting imprint.



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Time is also the thing that, according to critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin's essay 'What Is Epic Theater?', makes a gesture "quotable" or memorable. Benjamin posited that a gesture's impact is less about the gesture itself and more about the pause between gestures, the moment of anticipation. This exhibition invites viewers into that pause, stretching it, sharing it. It is a gesture, in and of itself, into deeper contemplation of the marks we ourselves leave. And it is, indeed, "quotable."

Exhibition Info

Les Filles du Calvaire

Group Show: 'Empreintes: du geste au langage'

Exhibition: July 8-Sept. 20, 2025

fillesducalvaire.com

17 Rue des Filles du Calvaire, 75003 Paris, France, click here for map