



**Alberto Burri, *Sacking and Red*, 1954,
acrylic and hessian collage on canvas, 34" x 39½".
Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art.**

ratives of the decades after World War II. That should start to change with this welcome show of about 40 works packed into three rooms, his first retrospective in Britain since the 1960s. Titled "Form and Matter," it offered a meaty review of his pioneering oeuvre and hinted at his influence over Robert Rauschenberg, Pierre Soulages, and the *arte povera* movement, among many others.

Burri trained as a doctor and did not start painting seriously until his late 20s, in a wartime POW camp in Texas. His breakthrough came in the early 1950s when he began applying lengths of burlap to his paintings. Stretched across the canvas, the fabric gave his work the tactility of human skin. Although some critics saw it as a reference to rural labor or the rough cassocks used by Franciscan monks in Burri's native Umbria, the artist routinely denied any symbolism or metaphorical intent, insisting instead that he was interested only in his materials' formal properties, put in service of pure abstraction.

Over his long career Burri used plastic, ash, wire netting, steel, and, in place of canvas, an insulation material known as Celotex to create works of extraordinary complexity and grace. Often the subject seems to be the material itself, such as plastic scorched onto a surface or hanging limply like a skin graft in *Red Plastic* (1961). Despite his insistence on his abstract aim, figuration seeps in from all corners. It could be our own expectations at work or the artist's unconscious, or some combination, but people might see

Alberto Burri

Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art London

Known for his use of sackcloth, tar, zinc oxide, and various industrial materials, the Italian painter Alberto Burri (1915–95) has not always received his due in the conventional art-history nar-

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a crucifixion in the welded iron plates of *Black* (1961) or a reclining nude in *Sacking and Red* (1954), and yet both are abstractions. The ambiguity gives Burri's work its mysterious beauty.

—Roger Atwood



**Tatjana Valsang, *Felder*, 2011,
acrylic on canvas, 7¼ x 5'.
Konrad Fischer Galerie.**