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## Artists Decorate Palazzos, and Vice Versa

**Venice Biennale** At the 54th festival: The artist couple Eva and Adele, above, view Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's American exhibit, a treadmill on a tank; Mike Nelson's trompe l'oeil rabbit hole to old Istanbul, right; and Dominik Lang's "Sleeping City."



VENICE — When it comes to dense, out-of-control concentrations of contemporary art, there is nothing like the Venice Biennale. With its big central exhibition, its ever-rising number of national pavilions and the scores of collateral shows organized in museums, galleries and palazzos all over the city, the Biennale never stops. It is a cornucopia of recent artistic endeavor, endlessly amplified by Venice itself, which remains one of the most culturally layered, artful and art-filled places on earth.

The multihued beast of the Biennale reflects the hopes, dreams and decisions of thousands of individuals and organizations: artists, curators, museum directors and trustees, art dealers, corporate sponsors and a United Nations' worth of governmental bodies and functionaries, not to mention well-heeled collectors from around the globe determined to raise their profiles with lavish parties, displays of their art holdings or both.

The rest of us just live in their world, trying to make sense of the spectacle of art, money and ambition they generate, taking

pleasure and insight where we find it, which is as often in the city itself as in the array of artworks: dished up for our momentary delectation.

And the 54th Biennale — which began on Saturday and will run through Nov. 27 — certainly dishes up: starting with "Illuminations," the event's rewarding if relatively sedate central survey, and a cluster of pumped-up shows in the national pavilions arrayed across the lush Venetian park known as the Giardini.

### Keeping It Real

Those pavilions give us a Biennale on steroids. With some notable exceptions, what might be called late-stage festivalism dominates, in the form of large-scale, labor-intensive installations and environments. Discrete artworks are rare, never mind paintings; Jasper Johns's famous admonition to "take an object, do something to it," seems to have been upgraded to the more aggressively territorial "take a space, fill it with something."

The main topic of conversation among the Giardini pavilions is

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the role of reality in art. We are treated to large, overwhelming chunks of the real — found, made or remade — and heavy doses of life and, in some cases, death.

In the British Pavilion, Mike Nelson has created a warren of small dim rooms that take the visitor down a rabbit hole to old Istanbul, a mind-boggling feat of trompe l'oeil that proceeds through abandoned workshops and grubby dwellings and includes a dusty courtyard open to the sky, with only two red-tinged dark rooms strung with photographs of Istanbul cracking the illusion.

Nearby Christoph Schlingensiefel, a filmmaker and theater director who died of cancer at 49 last August, represents Germany with a full-dress re-creation of a church and an often anguished recorded narration of his illness and crises of faith, complete with bits of liturgical music and Wagner. The walls are dotted with projections of (hilarious) film recreations of works from the 1960s by artists like Joseph Beuys, Valie Export and Nam June Paik, all of whom helped dissolve the border between art and life.

One of the Biennale's freakier sights appears in front of the American Pavilion, where the artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla have plunked a 60-ton military tank, upside down, with a treadmill sitting on its steel treads and called it "Track and Field." For 15 minutes every hour a runner uses the treadmill, which activates the tank's treads, creating an unholy racket that evokes a huge flock of metal starlings. As a comment on American might, entitlement and image consciousness it is as effective and as two-dimensional as a political cartoon, but like everything else in their exhibition, it has an unsentimental harshness that is something of an accomplishment.

A similar act of national criticism is under way at the Polish Pavilion, where Yael Bartana — an Israeli artist invited to represent Poland — has mounted a trio of videos under the banner "The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland." This fictional campaign to lure Jews back to Poland is best in the beginning, with a video of an impassioned speech by a bandana-wearing youth that mimics the propaganda films of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Israel itself. (American Boy Scouts are in here somewhere too.) "There's no closer other for us than you," the boy says.

Among all these tusslings with the real, the fullest artistic statement comes from Thomas Hirschhorn at the Swiss Pavilion. "Crystal of Resistance," his foiled, cavelike installation, equates crystalline growth with the spread of knowledge and the desire for freedom from oppression. Massive accumulations of



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An exhibition by Karla Black of Scotland stretches across several rooms of a Venice palazzo, above. Urs Fischer's wax-candle sculptures in the Biennale's main survey, "Illuminations," below left, are slowly melting. Bjarne Melgaard and local university students created a work on AIDS and militant queerness, below right.



cellphones, television sets, plastic lawn chairs and mannequins, along with photographs of the bloodied bodies of protesters taken from the Internet, conjure the recent revolutions in the Middle East for an effect as harrowing as it is inspiring. In this context Mr. Hirschhorn's interest in elucidating life's urgent problems through an experience of abstract form stands out.

There are a few moments of relative quiet. At the pavilion of the Czech and Slovak Republics, Dominik Lang's installation, built around the postwar figurative works of his father, Jiri, a forgotten sculptor, has an effective poignancy. In the Brazilian pavilion the veteran Conceptualist Artur Barrio has created a magical drawing-in-space installation with little more than charcoal, string, loose corn and some fish heads buried in boxes of salt.

And at the Australian pavilion the spare sculptures of the Egyptian-born, Sydney-based artist Hany Armanious mix everyday

objects and abstract forms and blur the line between found and made, achieving a homey elegance that is rare for this portion of the Biennale.

## Dots to Connect

"Illuminations," the Biennale's low-key headliner, works best as a kind of foil to the steroidal muscle and didacticism of the Giardini, playing down spectacle in favor of art making. It has been organized, as always, by the Biennale's director, who this year is Bice Curiger, the Swiss curator, art historian and magazine editor. Ms. Curiger's show, which begins in the Giardini's International Pavilion and continues in the former dockyard buildings of the Arsenale, offers work by 83 artists, 32 of whom were born after 1975 and 32 of whom are women — an interesting statistic in a year when female artists seem to be in unusually short supply in the national pavilions.

If the national pavilions often

strain to put on a show, Ms. Curiger simply presents artworks, ranging from the pure and abstract to the documentary and the political, with unusual equanimity and a good spatial sense. Her show seems to say: Here is some art. Look and think for yourselves.

Things get off to a wonderful start, with three 16th-century paintings by Tintoretto that imply that all good art is contemporary and that history is a good source of inspiration. But thereafter we are left to connect dots that are decidedly uneven.

Ms. Curiger wastes too much space on old standbys from her curatorial and publishing career, among them Sigmar Polke (1941-2010), whose paintings, however subversive, have become something of a Biennale fixture. Ms. Curiger's para-pavilions, tiny shows within the show organized by invited artists, work well, especially an installation of zig-zagging brocade-covered walls designed by the Polish artist Moni-

ka Sosnowska that serves as galleries for a sound-and-light installation by the Londoner Haroon Mirza and a veritable retrospective of the photographs of David Goldblatt, the chronicler of recent South African history.

Other high points include the colorful, tapestrylike drawings of Gedewon (1939-95), an Ethiopian artist-mystic-doctor, who used these intricate talismanic renderings as tools for healing; a hallucinatory video by the Israeli Omer Fast built around an interview with a former pilot of drones in Afghanistan; the insouciant, elegant, found-object sculptures and wall pieces of the Belgium-based Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri (a kindred spirit to Mr. Armanious of Australia); and solid contributions from Swiss artists like Pipilotti Rist and the team of Fischli & Weiss.

Over in the Arsenale a few older names stand out, especially James Turrell, with a magnificent, vision-cleansing colored-

light environment, but youth and, for the most part, sculpture hold sway. There are the evocative display of architectural models by the Zurich-based Georgian Andro Wekua, and Urs Fischer's actively burning, melting candle-sculptures of the painter Rudolf Stingel, slightly larger than life, contemplating a full-scale recreation of Giambologna's "Rape of the Sabine Women."

Often the younger artists seem to be in the thrall of nostalgia for Modernism, dissecting and re-assembling various vocabularies in small self-contained installations. This is the case with the Britons Ryan Gander and Rebecca Warren and the Russian Anya Titova. It has its most convincing expression in "The Foamy Saliva of a Horse," the Swiss-born New Yorker Carol Bove's eerie stage-set presentation of found and made objects, placed on a large high pedestal that all but squeezes the visitor out of the room.

## Farther Afield

There is tons more to be seen beyond the borders of the Biennale proper. Among the off-site national pavilions I recommend Karla Black's colorful aromatic installations at Scotland's, spread through a floor of a palazzo near the Piazza dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, that involves richly colored blocks of soap and dustings of dirt; and nearby at Mexico's entry, Melanie Smith's invigorating exhibition, which includes "Aztec Stadium/Malleable Deed," a roiling video involving crowds of people in a sports arena making images with placards.

Again and again come reminders that few things flatter a work of recent art more than its being installed in the relatively untouched rooms of a 16th- or 17th-century palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal. The American master Barry X Ball, heir to Messerschmidt's grimacing busts, will never look more credible than he does among the wonders of the Ca' Rezzonico, one of Venice's great palazzo museums. Not far away "Venice in Venice," a ragtag exhibition of California art mustered by the art dealer Tim Nye and the independent curator Jacqueline Miro, offered the sight of Larry Bell's smoky glass boxes in a small room lined with ancient mirrors, tarnished and similarly smoky.

Germano Celant's installation of work from the collection of Miuccia Prada and her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, in the nearby Ca' Corner della Regina, is a brilliant mixing of old spaces and relatively new art ranging from Donald Judd and Lucio Fontana to Jeff Koons and Francesco Vezzoli.

And at the Palazzo Contarini Corfu near the Accademia Bridge, Bjarne Melgaard and students from the Università IUAV de Venezia have orchestrated "Baton Sinister," a vehement update on the AIDS crisis and militant queerness that fills the entire piano nobile with paintings, polemics and trashlike installations, albeit only through June 30. Mr. Melgaard's contribution to the ensemble has an extravagance and fury that is unmatched anywhere else in Venice's dazzling, dizzying panoply of art.

## ONLINE: LOTS OF CRITICS

Roberta Smith and readers review works of art from the Venice Biennale, and more reports from the festival:

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