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Art



An illuminating time in Venice

DAISY DUNN



I arrive in Venice 12 days after the opening of the *Biennale*, and the glitterati have now receded from the Venetian shores. The locals are reclaiming their space and launching what is now *their* Biennale. In a private quarter of the city they host a 'Sagra', an evening festival of feasting on local produce, dancing beneath the fairy lights, and exploring the magnificent Church of San Francesco della Vigna.

I'm very much the English intruder here, save for the live renditions of Pink Floyd echoing through the backstreets. The celebrations extend across the islands. For the first time in over a year Venice is putting on the equivalent of a London 'Friday late', wherein galleries, museums, and Biennale collateral exhibitions stay open until midnight.

In Praise of Doubt at the Pinault collection is the first I visit. The building, *Punta della Dogana*, is overwhelming and brimming with exuberant Italian youths. Tadao Ando ('An architect with no university degree!') converted it a few years ago from a series of 15th Century storehouses, and the space retains its barn-like openness. Among its sea of installations, including a collection of Jeff Koons's steel 'inflatables', hang two large canvases by New York artist Julie Mehretu.

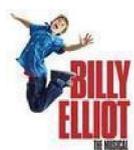
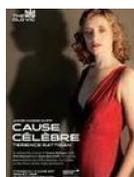
Each offers a precise architectural drawing, one of New York, the other of Venice, overlaid with the artist's chaotic annotations. Wholly monochrome, except for a few lines of colour over the American skyline, they are an effective and very literal take on the notion of psycho-geography. In subject they complement the architectural sketches of fellow American artist Cy Twombly from Irena Sonnabend's collection, which provides the stuff of the highly varied Peggy Guggenheim Biennale show.

While the Biennale is better known for its installations and conceptual projects (which number in the hundreds) designed to shock and repel more than please, the understated musings of French-born artist Guy de Cointet provide some relief.

The main Biennale exhibitions sprawl across the Giardini and Arsenale areas of Venice. De Cointet's drawings occupy the walls of the main Giardini pavilion. One, (Untitled [*Muhammad's signature*, c.1971]) a simple, geometric pen and ink drawing covers the page like a white quilt. At the bottom left the artist has jotted a sardonic note, 'There were important letters to read. However...' transforming the drawing into an envelope scrawl, and drastically undermining the artist's fine workmanship.

Unusually, Anish Kapoor's contribution, *Ascension*, is also understated, for all the work conducted behind the scenes. The installation consists of an artificially crafted column of smoke that rises up, translucent and ever-changing, into the dome of the Basilica di San Giorgio. It's a recreation of installations constructed elsewhere in the world, but it works especially well here because its substance is wholly appropriate to the religious setting of the Basilica.

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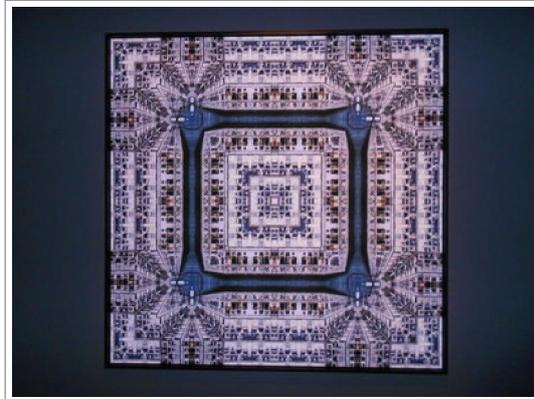
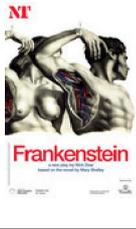
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The magnificent canvas by Tintoretto that normally hangs in this space has been transported to the Giardini for the Biennale, but by association Kapoor's rising steam now sounds a clear dialogue with Tintoretto's ceiling painting, Pillar of Fire, at the wondrous Scuola of San Rocco. The title of this year's Biennale is ILLUMInations. In general, the most memorable artworks are those that indeed spark, or illuminate, a convincing dialogue between old and new, between Venice and the multifarious nations involved in curator Bice Curiger's enterprising project.



Among these must be counted Bizhan Bassiri's *La caduta delle meteoriti* (The Fall of Meteorites), a collection of highly textured, black sculptural monuments interspersed among the spaces of the Archeological Museum in San Marco; the photographs of Chinese artist Huang Kehua displayed in the neighbouring Marciana Library and reflecting in their watery surfaces the golds and blues of Veronese's ceiling paintings; and Argentinian artist Adrián Villar Rojas' installation *The Murderer of Your Heritage* at the Arsenale.

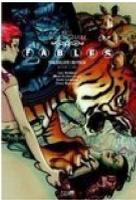


The Argentinian's columns of clay – twisted, contorted, as if drilled directly up out of the earth – reminded me of the Chilean mining disaster, but the evidently more optimistic characters in the room compared the monuments to trees in leaf. Rojas's is accessible abstract art. It invites speculation, scrutiny, and reflection, which is more than can be said for so much of the artwork on display in the rustic rooms of the Arsenale. It's not surprising that this piece should strike a resonant chord with the Venetians, ever aware of the waters feeding upon their city's architectural foundations.

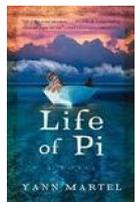
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Giving poignant expression to these feelings, the photography exhibition *Real Venice* in the Officina dell'Arte Spirituale, San Giorgio, organised by the Venice in Peril Fund, displays, among others, Antonio Girbés' beautiful computer-enhanced images of the city's architecture shot from multiple perspectives and preserved in kaleidoscopic compositions that leave the viewer disorientated. Even Norman Foster purportedly said he couldn't tell whether he was looking on from above, below, or the side, to which Girbés replied 'All... and more.'

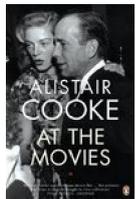


Mimmo Jodice's romantic stills, captured through slow-developing exposures are equally mesmerizing. *Arsenale Venezia*, 2010, offers a suitably isolated view across the Spartan exhibition space. Many of the photographs from the exhibition will tour to London in November to be sold at auction through Phillips de Pury, and are definitely worth seeing.



Just before I fly home I meet a man enjoying his constitutional Aperol spritz on the Lido. One of the photographs which falls, cascading, from his pocket is of a prostitute lying across a table. 'Forget the Biennale, this is real Venetian art', he says. He has a point. Venice of the Renaissance crawled with prostitutes, and many of them found enduring fame in its art. The surprising problem, at least for us today, is that it's sometimes hard to distinguish Renaissance paintings of prostitutes from representations of well-heeled ladies.

But few of the installation-type works in this year's Biennale (prostitute-inspired works included) will need to stand the test of time. When the Biennale closes in November they will be dismantled. The best art of this year's Biennale speaks effortlessly through space, if only for the present, while inviting, rather than controlling, speculation.



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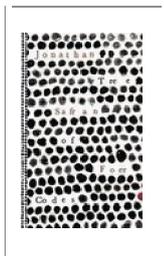
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Bizhan Bassiri - The Fall of the Meteorites, Archeological Museum, San Marco, Venice

Adrian Villar Rojas - The Murderer of Your Heritage - 2011 - Argentinian Pavilion, Arsenale, Venice

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