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Oscar Humphries

2 Jun 2011

The art world gathered in Venice this week for one of the most lavish parties of the year to celebrate the start of the 54th Venice Biennale.

The contemporary art festival is for artists, curators, dealers, collectors and their groupies and is the single most important date in their calendar.

Olympian in scale, a record 89 countries are participating, showing work in pavilions in the Giardini park or at the Arsenale [Venice's former naval dockyard] site nearby. First-time participant [Haiti](#), with admirable imagination and tenacity, is showing in some shipping containers near the centre of the city. It is impossible within the four preview days to see everything.

Around these national exhibits there are other official and semi-official satellite events, exhibitions and pop-ups. There are artist's talks and debates and, like that other flashy cultural event of the early summer, the [Cannes Film Festival](#), there are lots of parties.

Last night was the Il Mondo Vi Appartiene dinner; tonight [Miuccia Prada](#) launches the Fondazione Prada's restoration of the impressive Ca' Corner della Regina palace and the party of the week to mark the



Sparkling: Salma Hayek, wife of billionaire collector François Pi

exhibition Commercial Break, a multimedia installation that includes contributions by more than 80 artists, will be held at the Bauer hotel.



This, the Gritti Palace, the Danieli and the Cipriani are Venice's grandest hotels and are all now completely packed, their bars and restaurants teeming with the art crowd, identifiable because they're all wearing black and showing each other photos of installations on their iPhones.

On one hand you have high art, on the other you have a culture of fashion. A Brazilian collector said to me that "Picasso was like Madonna - constantly reinventing himself" without a trace of irony. Perhaps it is this combination of high and low culture, of the deeply cerebral with the headily vacuous, that makes these few days so compelling and such a draw.

The Venice Biennale has become as much about the circus of the art world as it has about the art on show, but it is still important to remember that great art is what gives this festival its gravitas and is the single reason why so many people visit after the circus has left town (the pavilions and many of the other exhibits remain open until November).

It might well be that the best time to visit Venice and this wonderful testament to the breadth, quality and diversity of international contemporary art is actually at the end of the summer, when it will be possible to look at and enjoy the art without the distraction of a dozen art dealers blocking your view, or the thousands of tourists who make Venice in August almost unbearable.

Were this a competitive sporting event, then the artist running for England is certainly world-class. Mike Nelson possesses great talent and imagination. Twice nominated for the Turner Prize, he is known for his controversial installations.

His entry this year makes a stronger case for the quality of British art than Tracey Emin's rather limp efforts did in 2009.

Highlights elsewhere in Venice include Anish Kapoor's eerie site-specific work, Ascension, at Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore. Julian Schnabel, the American artist and film director's exhibition Permanently Becoming and the Architecture of Seeing at the Museo Correr is worth visiting if only to decide for yourself whether or not his work deserves another look. He was along with Jean-Michel Basquiat, the most famous American artist of the Eighties. The opera party was hosted by at least five people, including the world's most successful art dealer, Larry Gagosian, and the Milan and London-based art dealer Marco Voena. I don't think I've ever seen so many names on an invitation. A dinner was given for Schnabel on Tuesday night where, in his trademark pyjamas, he danced while his daughter Lola DJ'd.

Elena Foster, the accomplished publisher of artists' books and C International Photo Magazine and wife of the architect Lord Foster, curated the exhibition Real Venice at the Abbey of San Giorgio Maggiore, which includes photographs by, among others, Nan Goldin and Candida Hofer. Selected works are to be auctioned in London later this year as part of a campaign to raise funds to save Venice from flooding.

There is tremendous excitement about new participants this year and about the entries from art world hotspots like Brazil, Mexico and China. Tropical Brazil is the flavour of the month now but its exhibit this year is a real disappointment. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and India are all debuting independent pavilions.

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For all of its glamour, this is not an event without seriousness. Even politics has its place here in the lagoon. Not only the internal politics of the event itself, with rumours of possible resignations; global politics this year in particular has a palpable, if invisible, presence.

The Arab Spring has shaped at least two of the pavilions - [Bahrain](#) withdrew and will not be showing this year; the Egyptian pavilion will show work by Ahmed Basiouny, a young artist who was shot dead filming protests in [Cairo](#) earlier this year. Knowing his story gives the work a poignancy and resonance that sobered an otherwise effusive crowd.

When I came to Venice, one of the things I was looking for, apart from the usual diversions and treasures, was to see if this global recession would, in any way, dampen the exuberance of the Venice Biennale. Would there be fewer collectors?

Would the exhibitions be more modest in scale and would the parties, for which it has always been famous, be any less extravagant?

The answer is no; this is a city that, despite political angst and rising waters, appears to be frozen in time. The current economic climate has not, in any way, changed the temperature here. New collectors from [Latin America](#), China and eastern Europe are fuelling an industry which the Biennale is the most glittering and seductive manifestation. 2011 sees not a dead Venice but an art world more alive than ever.

Oscar Humphries is editor of the art magazine Apollo.

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