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Venice past and present

The Venice Biennale (4 June-27 November) shows some of the best contemporary art in the world in a stunning setting. But there is more to it than the official programme. Sarah Greenberg revels in Venice's extraordinary art fest, while Jerry Brotton visits the Cini Foundation, where old meets new on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore Venice past and present

Why Venice matters

A visit to Venice needs no excuse, but the Biennale provides a good one. Nowhere else on earth is it possible to encounter avant-garde and historic art in a single footstep. This year's director, Swiss curator and critic Bice Curiger, proves the point by placing three Tintoretto's at its heart in the Central Pavilion. For her the Venetian artist is the first experimental painter, one whose 'febrile, ecstatic lighting... and reckless composition' broke the rules of Renaissance art. He serves as a model for mould-breaking artists everywhere.

Tintoretto's *Last Supper* (1592-94) has been borrowed from the Basilica San Giorgio Maggiore, but Anish Kapoor RA is filling the space with his swirling tower of smoke that rises to the dome, making the immaterial seem tangible. Meanwhile, 40 or so collateral events around the Lagoon offer a chance to peek behind normally closed doors. *Venice in Venice: California Art 1960 – Present* brings cool West Coast art to a private palazzo on the Grand Canal, with artists such as Ed Ruscha, David Hockney RA, and James Turrell. Farther afield on Certosa island, Hollywood actor James Franco is collaborating on an intriguing film installation, with artists including Paul McCarthy and Douglas Gordon.

During the Biennale, museums stage important shows: the Peggy Guggenheim displays the private collection of legendary post-War New York dealer Ileana Sonnabend, who showed artists such as Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. At the Museo Correr, Norman Rosenthal presents a retrospective of Julian Schnabel. And I'm willing to queue for the third instalment of Belgian gallerist Axel Vervoordt's eclectic collection, dramatically displayed in the atmospheric Palazzo Fortuny. He mixes ancient with modern, priceless with popular, in a show that invites viewers to feast their eyes on art.

At the official Biennale, pavilions to see include Great Britain, where Mike Nelson, a sculptor known for his sprawling installations, is taking over the neoclassical space. For Spain, film-maker Dora García questions what it means to be on the margins in a provocative performance. For Poland, Artangel have commissioned Israeli artist Yael Bartana to make films about her family's Polish past. While at Scotland, Turner Prize nominee Karla Black makes ephemeral environmental sculpture. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The Venice Biennale offers an opportunity to be surprised and challenged by art from every era. For more recommendations from the opening week, see my RA Magazine blog. **SG**

Island treasures

Visitors to this year's Biennale should take the opportunity to visit the Giorgio Cini Foundation on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, home to the magnificent basilica, refectory and cloister built by Palladio in the 1560s. The Foundation was established by Count Vittorio Cini in 1951 with the aim of returning the island – which faces St Mark's Square across the lagoon – to its former glory following the damage inflicted in the Napoleonic and Austrian occupations. It now acts as a repository of Venice's cultural history, with a spectacular library, new exhibition spaces and the residential Branca Centre as venues for world class exhibitions, concerts, meetings and research.

In 2007 the Foundation collaborated with the Louvre on the 'return' of Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* to its original location in the refectory after Napoleon sent it to Paris in 1797. The facsimile was made with technology developed by the British artist Adam Lowe, founder of Factum Arte, a Madrid-based workshop operating at the forefront of the digital reconstruction and reproduction of art works. Lowe has invented cement printers with Anish Kapoor RA, made towering bronze flowers for Marc Quinn, built facsimiles of Egyptian tombs and, in recent projects with the Cini, challenged distinctions between copies and originals, making Caravaggio facsimiles, and creating Piranesi objects in bronze and marble from his original designs.

This year sees further ambitious collaborations between the Cini and Factum. Lowe is curating *Penelope's Labour*, a radical reappraisal of historical and contemporary tapestry that includes works by Marc Quinn, Craigie Horsfield, Carlos Garaicoa, and Grayson Perry RA. Elsewhere on the tiny island, *The Real Venice* exhibition in aid of Venice in Peril shows fine art photographs of La Serenissima. There is also a major installation by Anish Kapoor RA in Palladio's basilica.