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July 26, 2011 5:04 pm

That sinking feeling

By Jan Dalley

Feedback?

For all the art, the hype, the chatter and the parties on super-yachts lined up along the waterfront, the undeniable star of the Venice Biennale is the city itself. It's a place that never fails to astonish us with its beauty – and the sense of its impossibility. Everyone knows that Venice is threatened by rising tides and crumbling stonework, which only adds to the sense of its fragile glamour.

Venice in Peril, a charity founded to save the city's monuments, has mounted an exhibition entitled *Real Venice*, exquisitely curated by Elena Foster (wife of architect Norman) in a theatrically adapted cloister of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore. It is a bold and beautiful attempt to raise both funds and consciousness. The challenge, to the 14 leading international photographers invited to take part, seems an almost impossible one: to take an original picture of Venice, a place so much photographed that the most radiant panoramas in the world can easily ricochet straight back into visual cliché.



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The results are a magnificent array of large-scale, lightbox-mounted images of which many, although not all, have achieved the feat of avoiding predictability. Highlights include Hiroshi Watanabe's spooky carnival figures, turning their distorted masked faces to us in chilly disdain, against a misty smudged-out background that hints at a wintry cityscape beyond; Robert Walker's garish horror-show-cum-celebration of the city's tourist tat (lewd aprons, T-shirt slogans, hats and flags), a vision of La Serenissima as pop art.

Dionisio González's imaginary cityscapes, in which, for instance, a contemporary building by Corbusier, planned but never realised, is slipped in among the facades of the Grand Canal, provide a thoughtful commentary on the city-as-museum; while Pierre Gonnord, one of the very few to include Venetian human beings as well

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as Venetian vistas, makes of some local faces stunning portraits of Caravaggesque intensity.

Other photographers who have donated their work for the cause are Lynne Cohen, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Antonio Gribés, Nan Goldin, Candida Hofer, Tiina Itkonen, Mimmo Jodice, Tim Parchikov, Matthias Schaller and Jules Spinatsch. Some of the pictures will be sold at Phillips de Pury in London later this year, with proceeds to the charity; the rest are for sale privately after the show has completed an international tour.

As an awareness-raising exercise, the exhibition is much to be commended. Anna Somers Cocks, chairman of Venice in Peril, has declared that “Venice needs contemporary art to help us see it with fresh eyes so that new, creative energy will be applied to its salvation”, and the fresh eyes here also deliver a payload of ravishing images.

But Venice needs simple, direct and immediate action as well as wider awareness. The city authorities themselves have two plans for the physical structure of Venice. One, known as the Mose scheme, is for an expensive and ambitious hydraulic flood barrier at the mouth of the lagoon; the other, much more prosaic, but perhaps more immediately achievable, is an ongoing programme of cleaning all the smaller canals to improve waterflow, and of raising the level of streets and squares by infilling with soil and stones. This plan is continually halted, not surprisingly, for lack of funds.

What's more, Venice is also in peril from factors beyond the rising waters. There are 58,000 Venetian residents. The city has 16m-17m visitors a year. This represents a tidal force of another kind: the majority of Venetians cannot afford to live in their own city, and the young people either move away or suffer long and miserable commutes from the mainland to service the tourists who are in their place. Despite the fact that much of the work in *Real Venice* is magnificent, what is noticeably absent is Venice's actual population and their daily lives. It is still very much the outsider's view, an “unreal” Venice in fact.

If Venice is there to be seen by our great-grandchildren, it needs to be saved as a living city with a livable economic reality: measures such as subsidised housing are every bit as urgent and essential as the cleaning of paintings and sculpture and the shoring up of foundations. Otherwise, the Venetian – a mammal already as rare as the snow-leopard – will be completely extinct within a few decades, and the world's most magical city will become merely the world's most magical tourist theme park.


'Real Venice', San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice to September 30.

www.veniceinperil.org

www.phillipsdepur.com

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