

ARTS

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The Don't-Miss Shows and Pavilions at the Venice Biennale

There are more than 100 exhibitions and presentations taking place in this year's extravaganza. Our critic soaks up the highlights.

By Jason Farago

May 13, 2019

VENICE — When the yachts of billionaire collectors sail into the city and the vaporettos are full of hurried, multilingual aesthetes in head-to-toe black, it can mean only one thing: The Biennale is underway! The 58th edition of the world's oldest international art exhibition opened to the public on Saturday after a professional preview that saw far too many of us clamber from show to show, cocktail to cocktail.

As always, the Venice Biennale is a show of two halves. It consists of a principal international exhibition, curated this year by Ralph Rugoff and including about 80 artists; and a collection of 90 national pavilions, each organized independently of Mr. Rugoff's show. The pavilions are scattered in the Giardini, a park in the city's east, and in the Arsenale, a complex of former shipyards and armories; and elsewhere across town. A jury awards prizes to artists in both sections; this year, the top award, for best national pavilion, went to a sensational performance piece by three artists from Lithuania.

Museums and foundations in Venice also put on their biggest shows during the Biennale, and in canalside palazzi rented for the season, you'll find a pop-up masterpiece here, some sponsored schlock there. Give yourself a week and you can make a solid dent, but don't neglect the churches and monuments all around you; when contemporary art lets you down, there's always Tintoretto!

We'll be publishing a full review of the 2019 Venice Biennale shortly — but here is a primer to this year's event, with a trio of the best national pavilions and some other important shows.

The Must-See Pavilions

Lithuania: 'Sun & Sea (Marina)'



One of the cast of performing characters in “Sun & Sea (Marina).” The installation won the prestigious

Golden Lion award. Andrej Vasilenko

This year's showstopper, whose deep ecological engagement comes with irrepressible joy, is one of the hardest to find. To reach the Lithuanian pavilion requires a long walk north to an active military site near the Arsenale. Enter the hangar, climb some stairs to an empty attic, look down through a large hole in the floor, and you'll find an artificial wonder: Here, in this city on the water, is a pristine sand beach.

The beach is full of bathers, young and old, fit and fat. Children skip through the sand, three friends play chess on a travel set, a middle-aged woman fills out a Lithuanian crossword. And they sing, all 20 of them, all through the day, while the spectators look down on them, benevolent and pitiless as the sun.

Rugile Barzdziukaite, the director; Vaiva Grainyte, the librettist; and Lina Lapelyte, the composer, all in their mid-30s, are the creators of this astounding operatic installation, which their cast will perform for eight hours straight every Saturday. The bathers sing of airplanes and piña colodas, of the Chinese sweatshops that made their swimsuits. A mother on a beach chair wishes for her son to visit the Great Barrier Reef before it's gone, and twins in identical bathing suits imagine life after death via 3-D printing. The winters, one soprano trills, have lately been unseasonably hot. Better put on more sunblock.

Ms. Barzdziukaite, Ms. Grainyte and Ms. Lapelyte understand that the beach is not an eternal human reality, but a bourgeois invention: Only in the 19th century did the once dangerous seaside become a place of public leisure. That century also gave us the Industrial Revolution that has since pushed human existence on the planet toward catastrophe — making the opera at the beach sound like a climatic requiem.

France: Laure Prouvost

“Deep See Blue Surrounding You” by Laure Prouvost is an absorbing video installation that shows a rattling journey across Europe, from Paris to Venice. Giacomo Cosua

The longest lines during the vernissage — two hours' wait, if you believe the complainers — were for the absorbing video installation by this psychologically inclined artist. In “Deep See Blue Surrounding You,” a group undertakes a rattling journey southeast from the Paris suburbs, galloping through a forest, teleporting to a cafe with a largely Arab clientele, sunning on the rocky coast of Marseille, and, at last, reaching this very pavilion in Venice.

Laure Prouvost's film deftly mixes high-resolution footage with shaky smartphone video, and is so up-to-the-minute that, at one point, we see the crumbling steeple of Notre-Dame. Its propulsive images of slithering octopuses and singing migrants imagine a community of bodies on the move, while Ms. Prouvost whispers in her signature breathy Franglais. So many artists get heavy-handed when tasked to “represent” a nation at Venice; Ms. Prouvost, almost alone, clearly saw the job as a chance to dream and approached “Frenchness” as a vessel big enough for all people, animals, and things. Bonus: Watch closely and, in one hilarious sequence, the artist will teach you how to sneak into the Giardini without paying.

Ghana: ‘Ghana Freedom’

Portraits by Felicia Abban, regarded as the first woman in Ghana to work as a professional photographer. The pavilion's walls of packed African soil were designed by David Adjaye. Felicia Abban; David Levene

This is the first outing at Venice for Ghana, and the country's pavilion contains an almost irresponsible amount of artistic firepower: the Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye has outfitted a section of the Arsenale with temporary internal walls of packed African soil; the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has written the lead catalog essay; and it features not one but six artists, including the filmmaker John Akomfrah and the sculptor El Anatsui. It's a show of force, but, for a first national presentation, not so revelatory: Mr. Anatsui, for example, already won a Golden Lion here in 2015 for lifetime achievement.

The pavilion succeeds best by mapping the rich historical inheritance shared by Ghana's citizens and its diaspora. You can see it in Mr. Anatsui's three glorious meshes of bottle caps; in Mr. Akomfrah's video triptych of human and ecological violence; and in the cordial, soft-focus studio portraits from the 1960s by Felicia Abban, regarded as the first woman in Ghana to work as a professional photographer.

The Smartest Shows

Luc Tuymans: 'La Pelle'

“Turtle,” a painting from 2007 by Luc Tuymans, on display at Palazzo Grassi. The exhibition “La Pelle” presents more than 80 works by the Belgian artist.

Luc Tuymans and Palazzo Grassi; Delfino Sisto Legnani e Marco Cappelletti

The gruff Belgian who helped resurrect the standing of figurative painting in the 1990s has turned the airy Palazzo Grassi, one of the locations of the Pinault Collection, into a brilliant downer. This retrospective, with more than 80 paintings in his stifled palette of gray, olive, blue and sour pink, reveals Mr. Tuymans as an artist who examines media imagery like a forensic scientist and who uses a surface of banality to suggest horrors out of frame.

A young man in a hat, his face blurred by boldly dabbed strokes of gray, turns out to be a cannibalistic murderer; a 2002 still life of fruit and a water jug, 16 feet across, is a disavowed response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Caroline Bourgeois, one of the most precise curators working today, has delivered a customarily sprightly show that mixes older and newer works — and that also uses some of Mr. Tuymans’s best early paintings (such as “Our New Quarters,” a chilling 1986 painting after a postcard of a concentration camp) as ballast for shallower later efforts derived from iPhone imagery.

Roman Opalka: 'Telling Time'

Left to right: “Détail 5603154-5607249” (2010-11) by Roman Opalka, “The Conversion of St. Paul” by Lo Schiavone (1542) and “Détail 1-35327” (1965) by Mr. Opalka.

Roman Opalka Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz; Baschang and Herrmann, Munich

In 1965, this Polish artist began his “Détails,” one of the most obsessive yet emotional projects of postwar art by painting the number 1 in the corner of a blank canvas. He took a breath, painted a 2, took another, painted 3 — and died, 46 years later, after painting the number 5,607,249. A beautiful presentation of Mr. Opalka’s art at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, hung by the inventive curator Chiara Bertola, places his stark, humanistic paintings amid the splendors of a Renaissance palazzo.

Small preparatory exercises for the number paintings, never before seen, appear inside a cabinet of antique musical instruments, and, on either side of Lo Schiavone’s churning “Conversion of St. Paul,” from the mid-16th century, are Mr. Opalka’s very first and very last “Détails.” The pair have never been seen together, and when viewed face-to-face, you feel you have stepped into the space of a life.

Jannis Kounellis

“Untitled,” a work from 2013 by Janis Kounellis, at the Fondazione Prada, has hundreds of little scales heaped with a mound of ground coffee.

Jannis Kounellis/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Fondazione Prada; Agostino Osio

After several years of deep-thinking group exhibitions, the Fondazione Prada hosts a clean, crisp, revitalizing solo show of this Greek-born Italian artist, who died two years ago and whose poetic installations of coal, stones, soil and used clothes made him a key figure of Arte Povera. (It has been curated by Germano Celant, the man who first coined the term Arte Povera in 1967.)

After his early paintings mimicking the lettering of Roman street advertising, Mr. Kounellis began to make assemblages that often put natural materials in relief with cultural or historical detritus: Here, a bag of coal in a sun-washed room has a live cellist for a roommate. In the stairwell of the palazzo that houses this exhibition is one of his last works, an untitled installation of hundreds of little scales, each heaped with a mound of ground coffee. It's the best-smelling space in Venice, and offers a welcome jolt to the art obsessives careering across the lagoon.

The Venice Biennale 2019

Read more about the art on show.

Venice Biennale's Top Prize Goes to Lithuania May 11, 2019

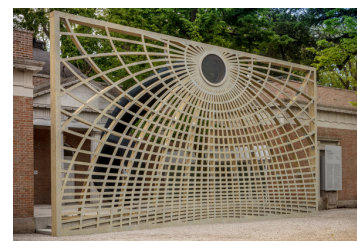


A Playful Curator Takes On a Tough Gig at the Venice Biennale

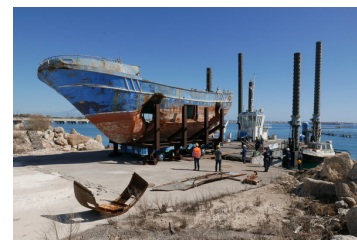
April 10, 2019



Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor May 3, 2019



Wreck of Migrant Ship That Killed Hundreds Will Be Displayed at Venice Biennale May 6, 2019



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