

Museums

Venice Biennale an ambitious but typically overblown international art festival

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By Jason Edward Kaufman

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VENICE

Like so much of the art world, this year's [Venice Biennale](#) is an example of the overblown spectacles, predictable politics and perverse performances that characterize cultural gatherings around the globe.

It seems artists no longer believe a canvas or a sculpture can make a sufficiently loud statement in a biennale. Instead they go for the grand gesture, creating massive theatrical environments whose scale and ambition cannot mask shallow content. New Yorker magazine critic Peter Schjeldahl dubs the phenomenon “festivalism.”

The biennale *is* a festival of sorts. It's the most comprehensive survey of international contemporary art, a vast and prestigious exhibition that has taken place in this Italian city nearly every two years for more than a century. The 54th edition opened this month and remains on view through late fall.

The core of the show is the Giardini park where 29 national pavilions present official exhibitions sent from Europe and the Americas, with a few from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, relative latecomers to the international art circuit. Nations lacking permanent pavilions get space in the nearby Arsenale or around town. A record 89 nations are participating

this year, up from 77 in 2009.

As if this weren't enough, there is an 83-artist group show curated by this year's director, the [Swiss](#) curator Bice Curiger, who titles her gathering "Illumi-nations" to suggest enlightenment and multinationalism.

What's on view?

Here's the scene in front of the U.S. pavilion: A sand-colored Army tank is flipped upside down with its turret on the ground. On top of its elevated undercarriage is a treadmill with an athlete dressed in red, white and blue and running in place, his action seeming to power the tank treads that roll with an ear-splitting clatter.

The contraption — conceived by the artist couple Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla — constitutes an unsubtle critique of American values.

The theme continues inside the Jeffersonian-style pavilion where a scale model of the "Freedom" sculpture from the Capitol dome lies in a sun-tanning bed, an ATM rigged with a pipe organ plays heavenly chords when visitors withdraw euros, and gymnasts perform muscular routines on painted-wooden replicas of business-class airline seats.

Maxwell Anderson, director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which commissioned the works, told me the exhibit is "an unabashed celebration of American commercial power around the world . . . richly dipped in irony."

"Gloria," as the conceptual installation is titled, may take issue with America's devotion to militarism and mammon, but it also betokens our government's respect for the First Amendment. How else to explain the

[State Department's](#) approval of an exhibit that satirizes ugly Americanism?

(The selection was recommended by art professionals convened by the National Endowment for the Arts.) And if the overturned tank is “festivalism” writ large, it's not alone at this year's biennale.

Mike Nelson transformed the neoclassical [British](#) pavilion into a walk-through Istanbul caravansary with alleys and attic spaces strewn with tables, stoves and broken loom components. The dimly lit warren opens onto an internal courtyard for which he removed the pavilion's roof. The down-the-rabbit-hole effect is transporting, and one can read into it something or other about the mutability of national identity, but the primary effect is astonishment at all the carpentry that went into its construction.

Christian Boltanski, a darling of the international circuit, similarly makes an over-the-top but ultimately empty gesture. He fills the [French](#) pavilion with metal scaffolding through which a giant filmstrip unspools on a conveyor belt, each frame showing a newborn baby's face. The assembly line suggests the randomness of birth and identity, a tired theme needlessly amplified.

The Golden Lion for best national participation went to the [German](#) pavilion, converted into a chapel memorializing filmmaker and experimental theater director Christoph Schlingensief, who died from lung cancer last year. A curator completed his Gesamtkunstwerk, which includes stained-glass windows and pews, X-rays of his ravaged body, and videos narrating his psychological distress and his affinities with the Fluxus art movement and others. Though an affectionate tribute, the confused panoply did not merit the grand prize.

Politics and social critique

War, poverty, civil rights and corruption are mainstays of international biennales, and this one is no exception. The [Egyptian](#) pavilion presents the work of Ahmed Basiony, a new-media and sound artist killed Jan. 28 during the popular uprising in Cairo's Tahrir Square. He was filming a government sniper when he was hit by rubber bullets, collapsed and was struck by a police car, according to the curator. His footage is juxtaposed with videos of an allegorical performance he did that involved sensors monitoring energy loss as he ran in place.

The [Chinese](#) pavilion is not memorable, but someone was handing out red bags emblazoned "Free [Ai Weiwei](#)," referring to the Chinese dissident artist who has been in custody on corruption charges for more than two months. And in the curated group show, [Israeli](#) filmmaker Omer Fast puts a human face on current events with an eerie staged interview with a U.S. drone pilot. Interspersed with aerial imagery, the film is as fascinating as a "60 Minutes" segment but seems less like a work of art than a calculated seizure on a hot-button topic to get attention.

More compelling is the [Polish](#) pavilion presentation of three films (2007-11) by Israeli-born artist Yael Bartana that portray a fictional political movement calling for Jews to return to Poland, where 3.3 million were murdered in the Holocaust. A Communist-style leader gives speeches declaring that the country cannot move forward without them, but after his party builds a kibbutz in a Warsaw suburb he is assassinated.

Unprecedented participation from Asia, the Middle East and Africa includes a pan-Arab show and pavilions from the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Bangladesh](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#). [India's](#) representation, the first in several decades, is an elevator cubicle whose interior walls showed synchronized projections that dizzyingly simulate ascending through floors of a building and into the air.

Another newcomer, [South Africa](#), includes a sculptural tableau in which a life-size, shaman-like woman confronts a rank of soldiers whose rifles have mysteriously vanished. And veteran photographer David Goldblatt is on hand with photographs of South African ex-convicts accompanied by texts with redemptive biographies detailing their excessive sentences for petty crimes and their aspirations for a new life.

Environmental issues mark several exhibits about water. Ayse Erkmen of [Turkey](#) turns a room of the Arsenale into a purification plant for water piped in from the canals. Sigalit Landau of Israel also pipes in canal water, but it's symbolic of a project of hers promoting collaboration between Israel and [Jordan](#).

The first [Iraqi](#) pavilion portrays the ravaged ecology and culture of the war-torn country. Azad Nanakeli, one of six expatriates in the show, baptizes himself in a video alongside a parallel image in which the water becomes a reddish haze. In an adjacent space, three dry spigots deposit a puddle of empty plastic bottles. Lack of clean water is a more pressing emergency than civil war and terrorism, according to the brochure accompanying the show.

Having attended nearly every biennale since the late 1980s, I know that most of its myriad offerings tend to be mediocre, lacking the aesthetic refinement and emotional power that reward extended contemplation. But some works are just plain fun. Japanese artist Tabaimo's hand-drawn animations of cityscapes transmogrifying with plants and abstract patterns are projected onto curving walls and mirrors, turning the small interior of the Japanese pavilion into an expansive multimedia fun house.

The top prize for a work in the "Illumi-nations" show went to London-based American Christian Marclay for his amusing movie "The Clock"

(2010), a 24-hour compilation of thousands of clips from films and television, each with a clock or reference to the time of day, the whole thing synced to the actual time where it is projected.

But I especially like a sculptural installation by Urs Fischer. The Swiss American artist made a life-size effigy of his melancholic artist friend Rudolf Stingel contemplating a replica of a 15-foot Renaissance marble statue by Giovanni Bologna and placed a lone desk chair resting nearby. The odd thing is, all three components are wax and have burning wicks melting them away. As they dissolve they elegize the vanity of aesthetic experience and artistic aspiration — a fitting symbol for the pumped-up, attention-seeking smorgasbord of contemporary art that is the Venice Biennale.

Kaufman is an art critic and reporter whose In View blog is at jasonkaufman.info.

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