

HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS

Personal but Highly Political Highlights from the 2015 Venice Biennale

by Maura Reilly on June 22, 2015



Patricia Cronin's 'Shrine for Girls' (2015), installation, Venice

VENICE — As I feel my way through a curtain and into a pitch-black, cavernous space, a white square shimmers in the distance. I'm standing on gravel, and it crunches under my feet as I walk uncertainly toward this mysterious object. There are two other viewers in this long, dark room, yet I suspect more people are present, and as I walk, I encounter them: four naked men performing cleansing gestures (as if with soap) in silence. As I pass them, images congeal on the white square. It is a small TV monitor showing silent, black-and-white footage of Fidel Castro responding to a journalist's question. This ingenious installation is the work of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, and it represents one of many such pieces currently on view in the main exhibition at the 2015 Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*, organized by curator Okwui Enwezor.

First performed at the site of a former jail for political prisoners as part of the 2000 Havana Biennial (where it was immediately censored by the Cuban authorities), Bruguera's "Untitled (Havana)" is a strong commentary on the control and repression that Cubans suffer in the face of the empty rhetoric of social utopia. It also reflects on citizens' intentional "blindness" to the reality of life under Castro's regime, and illustrates the contrasts between the discourse of those in power and those without access to free speech. It is a poignant, highly political work that represents Enwezor's stated curatorial mission to present to us the "state of the world" right now. And it's made all the more poignant by the fact that Bruguera is currently stuck in Havana, her passport confiscated by Cuban authorities — the result of an attempted but immediately censored restaging of her now-infamous participatory performance "Tatlin's Whisper."

Many of the other standouts for me in Venice share Bruguera's strong social concerns. For instance, "À la santé des alliés" (2015) is a multimedia work by Lebanese-born artist Mounira Al Solh that recounts Al Solh's ancestors' experiences in Lebanon and Syria during World War I, as well as moments from the Nasserite and pan-Arab revolutionary movements of the 1950s and '60s, during which time her grandfather was assassinated. She uses archival images alongside photocopies of family photographs, which she carefully paints over with gouache and tacks with masking tape, investigating how historical upheavals can register as personal traumas. Petra Bauer's installation "A Morning Breeze" (2015), on the other hand, is dedicated to the history of Swedish socialist women activists and campaigners who traveled around the country between 1907 and 1920 to organize and mobilize for the Socialist Women's Movement. The installation includes many of the movement's posters, excerpts from their short-lived magazine, *Morgonbris*, as well as black-and-white photographs of many members, presented in slide format. The thoughtful installation left me wondering how far women have truly come since the early 20th century. Has Sweden achieved what these women set out to do? Have they been fully emancipated, as was their wish?

There are other political and visual stunners in Enwezor's exhibition. Tiffany Chung's series of exquisite drawings, *Syrian Project* (2011–15), is informed by the artist's experience of living through the Vietnam War, its aftermath, and the mass exodus of South Vietnamese people out of the country. The seemingly abstract images display meticulously researched statistics about the numbers of children killed in different governorates, of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), refugee camps, and war casualties. Chung has translated the statistics into a series of maps wherein the colors and magnitudes of the dots indicate the intensity of the crises. The delicacy of these works belies their political content: this is a humanitarian crisis of a scale that's difficult to fathom.

Taryn Simon's installation "Paperwork, and the Will of Capital" (2015) presents a series of bouquets — pressed and photographed — along with corresponding texts derived from governmental agreements, treaties, and decrees. In historic photographs showing the signing of these documents, powerful men are typically flanked by magnificent floral arrangements. Simon has isolated these bouquets to mark their role as "silent observers" of man's determination to control the fates of nations and the natural world.

In a year when the central Biennale exhibition draws heavily on Karl Marx's canonical *Das Kapital* (which is being read aloud daily for the duration of the show) in order to examine global commerce, suffering, and humanity's future, it should come as no surprise that labor is a recurring motif. Emily Floyd's "Labour Garden" (2015) is made up of modular assemblages covered in brightly colored automobile paint, shaped into assemblages of letters that spell the words "Concrete Labour." The elements are arranged to form variable combinations of seats, carrels, and shelves, upon which are placed stacks of pamphlets containing 200 texts that focus on different fields of labor: Zombie Marxism, women's contributions to Autonomia, childcare and sex work, the Italian Laboratory and the Fiat strikes, free work, artists as proletariats, cognitive labor, immaterial labor, China labor news, and the Honda Strikes. It is a social sculpture and a protest work, for, as the artist explains, "The Biennale relies on free labor from students who will look after the artwork for the duration of the exhibition." One hopes that the many visitors sitting and reading the material on display will understand the content of Floyd's work, as it packs a hard punch, criticizing the Biennale employee contracts.

Taking up the issue of labor in less pointedly political, more darkly surreal ways are video installations by Wangechi Mutu and Mika Rottenberg. Mutu's animation, "The End of Carrying All" (2015), is a Sisyphean drama in which a black woman, wearing a patterned dress and balancing a large basket on her head, walks alone amid a barren landscape on a slight incline. At first the basket appears light as she swats insects away, but as time progresses, she clearly struggles with its weight, holding her back for support while mumbling. As her burden grows in size, she is attacked by a swarm of locusts, but fights onward and upward. By the time she reaches the top of a hill, she's on all fours, struggling under the weight of what is now a large, amorphous, liquidized blob, which slowly

envelops her before sliding down the hill. The blob is then sucked back into the landscape and the narrative begins again. Like all Sisyphian dramas, the protagonist is condemned to continuous repetition and futility of action. The gods were wise, Albert Camus once suggested, in perceiving that an eternity of futile labor is a hideous punishment.

Rottenberg's video "NoNoseKnows" (2015) is a caustic meditation on the rituals of pearl production. Preceded at the entrance by a makeshift "pearl shop" housing 600 pounds of cast-off imperfect gems, the single-channel video features footage of female workers harvesting pearls in the Zhuji factory in China. They insert tiny pieces of severed mussel tissue into the living freshwater mussels, which will "transform these cannibalized irritants into cultured pearls." Beneath the production floor a large woman sits in a flower-filled office; her schnozz grows long and red as she smells a wafting scent. Eventually, the woman sneezes explosively, and plates of Chinese food and spaghetti burst from her nose. Labor, luxury, and abjection intermingle in Rottenberg's continuously repeated narrative.

While social concerns dominate Enwezor's exhibition, there's no dearth of politics elsewhere in the national pavilions and collateral events. The Australian pavilion is a case in point. Fiona Hall's *Wrong Way Time* is a Wunderkammer-like installation that brings together hundreds of disparate objects related to three intersecting concerns: global politics, world finance, and the natural environment. Hall sees in these subjects "a minefield of madness, badness, sadness, in equal measure," and she has translated that into a phantasmagoric installation, knitting camouflage material into creepy heads that hang from the ceiling, shredding United States currency, weaving unspooled videotape, and integrating sardine and Coca-Cola cans, religious figurines, bones, credit cards, and cell phones into eccentric mini-displays. One corner features a collaboration with the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a group of Aboriginal women from the central desert of Australia, who contribute a large sampling of gorgeous, hand-sewn animal figures that Hall has placed intermittently on stacks of black books (collectively titled "Kuka Iritija [Animals from Another Time]," 2014). These figures sit in relation to display cases full of everything from Chinese cork dioramas with live insects and painted world currencies to bread sculptures in the shape of animals and bones, plus grandfather clocks painted with symbols and logos (QR codes, Twitter), texts ("Endings are the new beginnings"), and accounts of nuclear explosions and meltdowns. While the work references the perilous state of the natural world and our corrosive effects on ecology, Hall hopes it is nonetheless "dark but ... witty." It is.

While rushing around Enwezor's exhibition, I heard several people raving about Patricia Cronin's conceptual work at the Chiesa di San Gallo near Piazza San Marco, and rushed to see that also. Cronin's *Shrine for Girls*, Venice, a collateral event, is a profound meditation on the widespread and continued violence against girls and women around the world. Using piles of saris, hijabs, and aprons, Cronin addresses the hundreds of girls currently missing from Nigeria (kidnapped by jihdaist group Boko Haram in 2014), a horrific double rape-murder case in India, and the sad history of the Magdalene laundries in Ireland. The piles of clothing are placed upon marble altars and accompanied by three small photographs of the kidnapped girls, the rape victims, and girls working in the laundries, which function as key reference points for the viewer. In the context of a quiet church near San Marco, the installation functions like a *memento mori*, as the absence of the women and girls is palpably felt within the space. It's a profound and deeply tragic piece — and one that resonates beautifully with Enwezor's overarching emphasis on works that articulate "the current disquiet of our time."

On my final day in Venice, I visited the Armenian Pavilion, located in an 18th-century monastery on the Island of San Lazzaro. It won the best national pavilion prize, and I didn't want to leave without making the trek. It's a good thing I did, because the exhibition, curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg, is fantastic, centering on political work produced by artists from the Armenian diaspora, among them Aram Jibilan, Melik Ohanian, and Rosana Palazyan. Of particular merit is a multimedia installation by Anna Boghiguiian, titled "Ani" (2015), which explores a once prosperous medieval city named Ani that now sits in ruins in the Turkish province of Kars, on the Armenian border. Boughiguiian's homage to Ani

consists of papier-mache birds, a prayer book that belonged to her grandfather, wall text, planted roses, and a series of notebooks in which the artist, like a traveler, chronicles the city in gouache, watercolor, and wax. In 1860, the Kurds massacred the inhabitants of the city, and according to the artist, “no one went out alive except for the birds and the beautiful roses of Armenia that remain forever in my memory.” For Boughiguan, the rose and thorns symbolize both Armenian culture and the garden of paradise. Her hope is for a new Ani to arise from the ashes — a nostalgic metaphor for the “lost peoples” of Armenia who might also rise up one day. It is a quiet, contemplative work that lingers long after the encounter.

Also featured in the Armenian pavilion is Nina Katchadourian’s brilliantly fun “Accent Elimination” (2005), a six-monitor video installation in which the artist and her foreign-born parents practice two scripts — written separately by her mother and father — that reveal the origins of her parents’ accents. (Katchadourian was born in the US, but her mother is Finnish-Swedish, her father Armenian.) For the piece, all three took elocution lessons with an accent coach and practiced together in between, so that eventually Nina could speak the lines in each of her parents’ accents and her parents could speak theirs with their daughter’s standard American inflection. As the three practice on monitors simultaneously, the piece becomes a cacophony of sounds punctuated by the parents’ earnest smiles.

While many have criticized this year’s Biennale for lacking in aesthetics and being too morose, as a whole, I greatly enjoyed it — including Enwezor’s vision for it. Unlike many large-scale exhibitions in which the curator’s statement is lacking in focus, Enwezor’s truly presents what he proclaims: an attempt to “offer the world a global sounding board.” We are in a moment when the art world needs reminding that there are pressing sociopolitical issues which innumerable artists are grappling with, but which rarely make it onto the apolitical auction block. Politically aware art has never been a favorite among collectors. And dismantling Western-centric, monocultural assumptions embedded in the contemporary art narrative — as Enwezor works to do here — has always been controversial. (One need only think of the hullabaloo that ensued with shows like *Magiciens de la terre*, the 1993 Whitney Biennial, or Enwezor’s own Documenta 11, all of which challenged contemporary art’s monologue of sameness.)

This year’s Venice Biennale represents a radical departure from the norm on many levels: not only is it the most politically aware Biennale to-date, but it’s also organized for the first time by an African curator (Enwezor is Nigerian). Importantly, it is also the first Biennale show to employ a postcolonial curatorial strategy, reflecting on contemporary art in a time of profound historical change and global transformation. Insofar as it comprises a visibly larger number of non-European or American artists, this can be considered the first truly transnational Biennale as well. And while I take issue with the fact that only 33% of the artists on view are women, there was clearly a tremendous effort made to offer up a dialogue versus a monologue of voices, as is too often the case.

The 2015 Venice Biennale continues at sites around Venice, Italy, through November 22.

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