

STUDIO

The Venice Art Biennale
by Lisa Hilton

KIND, POLITE ART FOR A CRUEL, ANXIOUS WORLD: Adriano Pedrosa's curatorial theme for the 60th Venice Art Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*, unites the city's largest-ever number of exhibiting artists to remarkably small collective effect. Hesitant, gentle, mindful of its own relative triviality in the face of global horrors, the show is an assault on a long-abandoned fortress. Art which trumpeted transgression and confrontation was long due a sabbatical but replacing it with a dour ideological conformity which sternly polices the margins it claims to have centralised has produced a show whose earnestness frequently veers into arrogance.

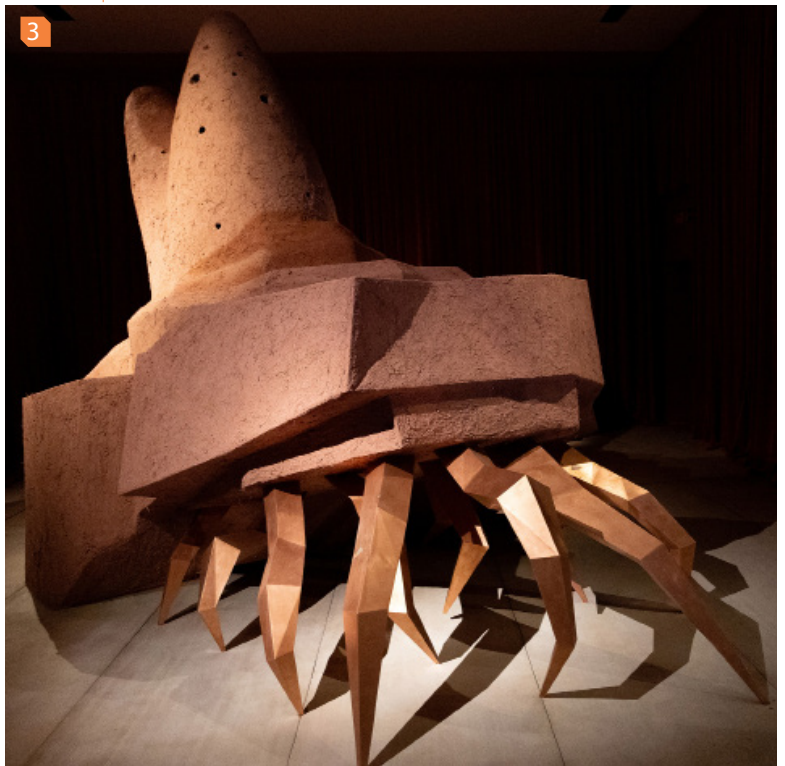
Take Jeffrey Gibson's garish, glossy production for the USA at Giardini, *the space in which to place me*, which emphatically lumps together Queer and Indigenous experience with little consideration as to how the former label patronises (or, arguably, linguistically colonises), the latter. Visually, it's a context-dependent, heavily-beaded dud [1], with the exception of *She Never Dances Alone*, a video installation featuring Sarah Ortegon HighWalking in an intricate performance to electronic dance group The Halluci Nation. Valorising the history and long-stifled traditions of Indigenous women feels at once righteous and

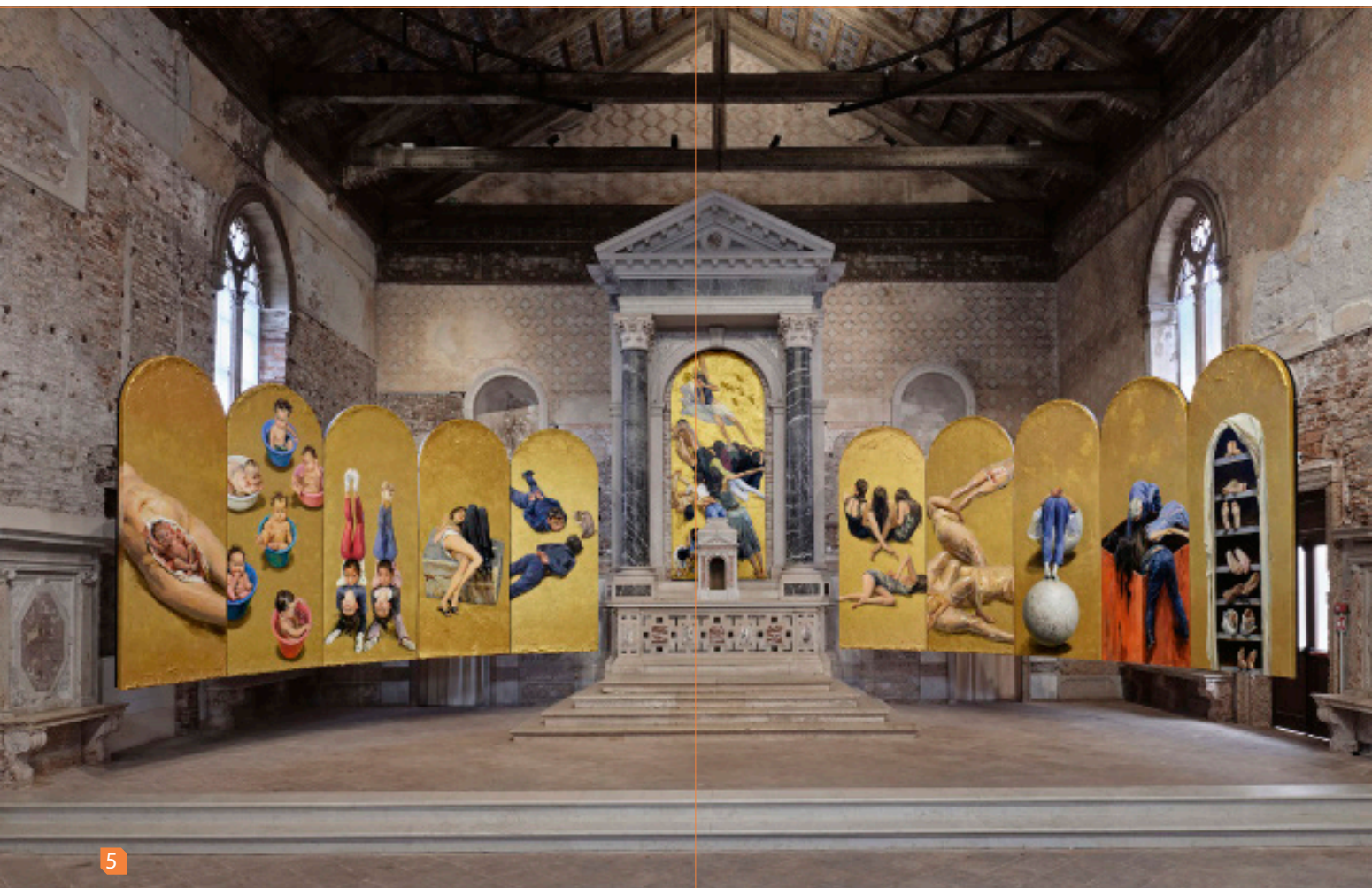


reductive here; ultimately we are still looking at something which has been lazily exoticised rather than rigorously investigated.

CONSIDERABLY MORE ENGAGING IS CZECH ARTIST EVA Kotatkova's intriguing interpretation of this year's theme [2] in a pavilion devoted to Lenka, the first giraffe brought to the country in 1954. Lenka's journey from Kenya and her short life as a captive exhibit become eerily vivid as visitors crawl through tunnels cast from her body, while latex casts of her skin and organs flap like the laundry lines of the streets of Castello just outside Giardini.

Memorable and disquieting, Kotatkova's apparently naïve work is subtly confrontational, prodding at questions of the categorisa-





5

tion of living creatures, animal or human. *Drama 1882* [3] by Wael Shawky for Egypt investigates the brief nationalist revolution led by Ahmed Urabi and its collapse under the British bombardment of Alexandria. A monumental production written, composed and directed by the artist, an eight-part opera focalises vitrines and works on paper in a captivatingly holistic work which deserves a day's visit in its own right.

FOR DENMARK, INUUTEQ STORCH HAS TAKEN OVER THE pavilion on behalf of the Kalaallit, Greenlanders, in an intimate show all the more evocative for its restraint. Photographs and archive slides reveal the poignant dignity of Inuit culture across generations. Storch defines the mood as suggestive of *qilaat*, other worlds, and the relative simplicity of the presentation does contribute to an eeriness which floats to the top of the memory and lingers there.

In contrast, the mood at Belgium is riotous: *Petticoat Government* follows the carnivalesque journey, convergence and arrival in Venice of a troupe of delightfully gaudy giants, who will proceed onwards to Dunkirk in 2025. The film of spectators dancing and interacting with the figures provides a much needed reminder that sometimes art can just be joyful.

Figurative work has made a tremendous comeback in recent years (quite possibly because human bodies do better on Instagram), and the main Biennale pavilion is certainly heavily

populated, if only occasionally vivacious. Louis Fratino's *Wine 2024* makes a cute locational nod to Veronese, whilst *Kissing My Foot* [4] can involve viewers in a fun game of Art Twister if you feel like working out who has got what where. Haitian brothers Senegue and Philome Obin are shown together in a powerful room whose teeming figures are at once riotously colourful and sinister.

Bypassing Venice's dismal effort, Romania's show of painting by Serban Savu brims with *sprezzatura*. Dense with references which are nevertheless lightly worn, Savu riffs fluidly on the tradition of socialist realism, producing one truly exceptional picture, the portrait of a dozing docent beneath a very nervous-looking Virgin. From the deliberately crude rendering of the Madonna's peasant companions to the bacterial staining of the shadows, leading the eye with wit and bravura, Savu's piece might be compared to the subversive sanctity of Caravaggio, were there not another contender for the legacy of Venice's greatest gift to the world, oil painting, in town.

YU HONG: ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST [5] AT ABBAZIA della Misericordia is simply a triumph, a luminous revel in the possibilities of paint. A ten-panel polyptych spans the breadth of the space, facing a huge canvas, *The Ship of Fools*. Aureate on their Byzantine gold backgrounds, the pictures hover with mystical allure. In many ways, this is the most radical show at Biennale this

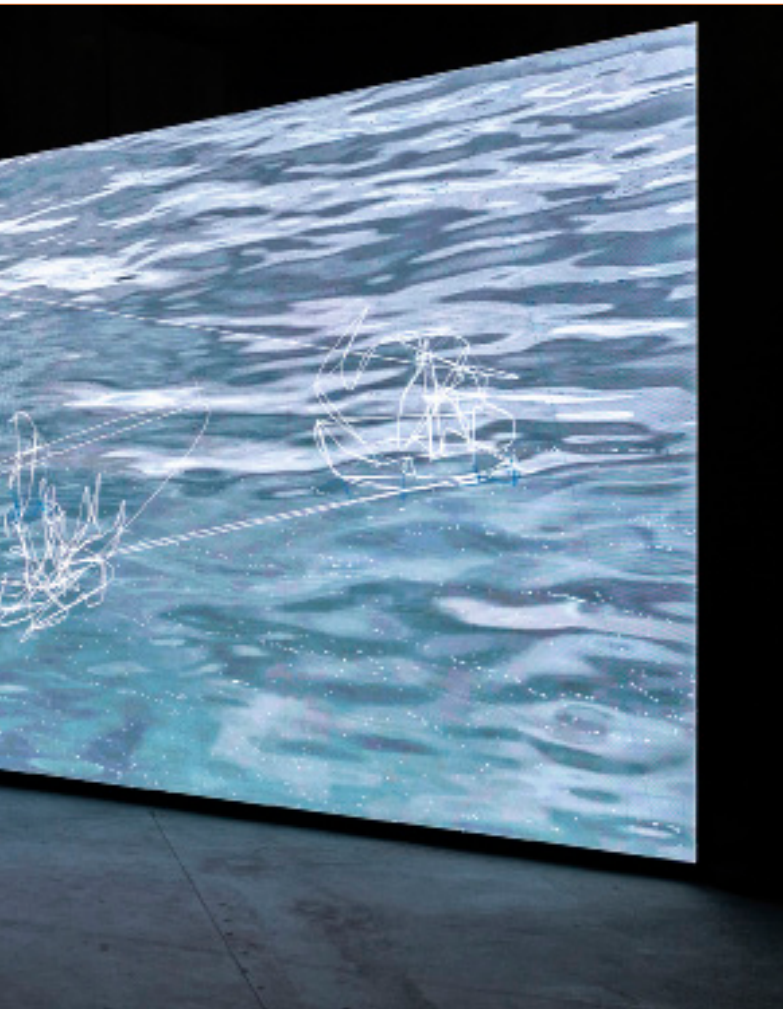
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year: no screens, no portentous sound installation, figurative works by an artist whose tender yet starkly arresting vision is matched in its depth by her mastery of her medium. Whilst the artist emphasises that the works are not religious, she locates them specifically within the discipline of the baroque, which in terms of her own practice stretches through an education based on the Soviet academies, and thence via eighteenth-century France to Italy. It's a worthy, luscious, unmissable homecoming.

If Yu Hong is unapologetically confident in tracing her influences to Renaissance Europe, the shows as a whole feel haunted, if not embarrassed by the reach of the past. Aside from the incessant beading, the recurrent tropes across the city are crucifixions and feet. From the Cubist domesticity of Tesfaye Urgessa at Ethiopia to Kateryna Lysovenko's *Rewriting the Bible* at Ukraine or *The Seven Deadly Sins* at Armenia, references to Christianity abound.

Read one way, this preoccupation suggests an allusive, possibly subconscious humility in the face of a collapsing world order, read another it could feel fearful and furious. Occasionally, the vaunted independence from Western tradition seems meretricious: at Arsenale Santiago Yahuarcani [6] is done a grave disservice by his labels, which assert unequivocally that his painting [detail below]

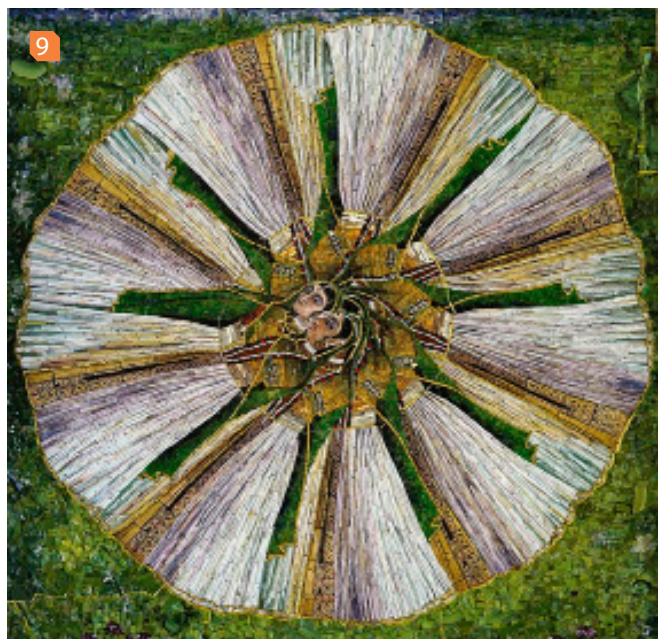




has absolutely nothing to do with European legacies. Maybe the Giotto devil from the Scrovegni Chapel devouring a limb at the centre of *El mundo del Agua*, surrounded by Hieronymus Bosch bird-people is merely coincidence.

IF THE OVERALL TONE IS RATHER BLOODLESS, SMUG and muted where one might hope for exhilaration, *Foreigners Everywhere* at least avoids the egregious inadequacies of past years. There are plenty of discrete thrills at Arsenal, including Matthew Attard's innovative *I Will Follow the Ship* [7] for Malta, which uses eye-tracking technology to create original collaborative works from data points. Musical instruments embedded in fibreglass rocks create a whistling, chirping, panting soundscape at the Philippines, whilst Chloe Quenum at Benin also uses blown-glass wind instruments around a bay window in "verre colonial" to investigate possession and fragility.

Beyond the two main sites, the Nigerian Pavilion is a standout for the breadth and variety of the works by its eight contributing artists, particularly Yinka Shonibare's punchy terracotta pyramid of reproductions of looted Benin statues, which emerge both assertive and vulnerable from the wall of Palazzo Canal. Shahzia Sikander's *Collective Behaviour* [8] at the gloriously Gothic Palazzo Van Axel is also varied and astonishingly accomplished. Incorporating exquisite Persian manuscript technique with collage, glass mosaic and flowing silhouettes in gouache,



Sikander's pieces effortlessly expose the shallow dichotomies imposed by *Foreigners Everywhere*.

Room-temperature political activism by way of mediocre art does nothing to address real world injustice and inequality, an inadequacy signalled by the timidity of much of this Biennale. It may boast of its geographical expansiveness, but it remains philosophically provincial, hemmed in by a pattern of thought which artists like Shahzia Sikander and Yu Hong have long since transcended.

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