

The best of the Venice Biennale 2015

Highlights from the international art extravaganza

MAY 18 2015

PERNILLA HOLMES

The opening of the 2015 Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*, struck a distinctly sobering tone, with politics, environmental degradation, social inequality, migration and conflict (often handled with a great sense of fragility) dominating Okwui Enwezor's curated exhibition and many of the national pavilions as well. But so too was there beauty in the video works, sculpture, painting, installations, music and performances that made up Enwezor's vision of a "parliament of forms" – the term he uses to describe his round embrace of all artistic media and disciplines. Around town there were also plenty of not-to-be-missed shows striking very different tones, and the highlights are well worth making time for.

Central Pavilion

1) The Arena – This is Enwezor's major innovation in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini, for which he invited art world star-architect David Adjaye to design a theatre-like space for performance art. The foundation upon which the show is built is the reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*, directed by Isaac Julien. Other ongoing performances include a piece by Olaf Nicolai – an homage to Italy's avant-garde composer Luigi Nono and his *Un Volto, e del Mare/Non Consumiamo Marx* – and, one of the clear stars of the biennale, jazz composer and artist Jason Moran, whose *Work Songs*, sung by mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran (third picture), analyse both the structure and feeling of the songs of slaves and inmates.

2) Fabio Mauri – Viewers entering the Central Pavilion are immediately confronted by a monumental wall of old suitcases. Made by the late Italian artist Fabio Mauri, "The Western Wall or Wailing Wall" is intended as a poetic recreation of the remaining wall of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, but also evokes images of abandoned suitcases in concentration camps, and stories of emigration, transit, identity, loss and hopes. The artist specifically referenced western racism and military actions, but the piece itself feels far more universal.

3) Kerry James Marshall – This features gorgeous paintings (first picture), both figurative and abstract, underpinned by the artist's strong interest in African-American identity and relationship with art history.

4) John Akomfrah – Vertigo Sea is a three-screen video work by the Ghanaian-born British film maker and activist. Ranging from spectacular landscapes to seascapes via underwater footage contrasted with hunting, Akomfrah has created a surprisingly moving 40-minute-long experience documenting splendour, horror and no-way-back change in man's relationship with the sea.

Arsenale

5) Propeller Group – The politically minded artist collective's sculpture is based on a rare artefact from the American Civil War of two bullets from opposite sides that had precisely collided, cancelling each other out, on the battlefield. A block of ballistics gel, the consistency of which roughly approximates to human flesh, is the intersection where bullets from an American M16 and a Russian AK-47 meet (second picture).

6) Lorna Simpson – Back in 1993 Simpson was the first female African-American artist to show at the Venice Biennale, and her work is no less powerful now. Provocative paintings include True Value, featuring a woman and her leashed wildcat; both in leopard print, their faces have been switched.

7) Sonia Gomes – A 67-year-old Brazilian artist from a textile town, Gomes worked for decades without artistic recognition. Her fetishistic, colourful biomorphic forms cling to the columns of the Arsenale, referencing their own origins conjoined with the long history of the building.

8) Rirkrit Tiravanija – An ongoing performance piece featuring Chinese brick makers producing bricks, factory-style, on site, which can be bought by art lovers for a €10 donation to a nonprofit organisation that supports workers' rights in China.

9) Mika Rottenberg – A highly surreal, intricate, stomach-turning but hard-to-stop-watching video including (among its riddles) the gritty manufacture and harvesting of cultured pearls and a woman with a growing red nose that sneezes a variety of meals.

10) Steve McQueen film Ashes – A short film from the artist/Oscar-winning film director in which the details of a young man's shortened life are narrated against footage of the making of his tombstone. Life is fragile – and a poor decision or two can all too quickly bring it to an end.

National Pavilions

11) Pamela Rosenkranz, Swiss Pavilion – Continuing her investigation into human bodies' interaction with the world, chemicals, stimulants, feminism and power, Rosenkranz turns the Swiss Pavilion into a sensorial experience of greens, fleshy pink and rippling fluids that give off a specially created baby-ish scent. It's as though the building has been turned into an organism.

12) Sarah Lucas, British Pavilion – Fans of Lucas and the YBAs will have much to celebrate in this rollicking British pavilion of bottoms, cigarettes, Page 3 girls, Franz West-like yellow sculptures flicking the bird to international art goers – and more.

13) Adrian Ghenie, Romanian Pavilion, Giardini – Working with the theme "Darwin's Room", Ghenie has created sections including The Tempest, The Portrait Gallery (Self-Portrait as Charles

Darwin) and The Dissonances of History; he tantalises with his thick brushstrokes and honed gestures. Gorgeous painting.

14) Olaf Nicolai and Hito Steyerl, German Pavilion – Mimicking shadowy micro-economies, Nicolai's Giro has three people living on the roof of the German Pavilion making boomerangs, unseen until they come to the edge of the roof to test them out. The finished boomerangs will then go to street hawkers to be sold, circumventing the art market system. Meanwhile, clearly visible in a dark gallery gridded with neon blue, Steyerl's high-definition Factory of the Sun video installation documents the creation of a virtual reality video game, and questions freedoms and rebellion in the face of digital streams of information and categorisation.

15) My East is Your West – Pakistani/Indian Pavilion – A pavilion shared by old foes Pakistan and India and their respective artists Rashid Rana and Shilpa Gupta. Among Rana's works, viewers face a full-screen projection containing a mirror image of the Venice room they are standing in – but with a young Pakistani man there who speaks to them in real time. It turns out he's on a street in Lahore, and it's hot there. Occasional passers-by jump in the frame.

16) Christoph Büchel, The Mosque – Icelandic Pavilion. The thousands of Muslims from 29 countries who live in Venice have never had a place to worship in its historic centre, until now. Büchel has turned a disused Catholic church into a mosque, to considerable controversy in the city and press coverage internationally. The feeling inside the Mosque itself is busy, peaceful and purposely educational. Odd to think it will all close again in just seven months.

Collateral events

17) Palazzo Fortuny – Just up the Grand Canal, but conceptually a world away from the overtly political art of the Biennale, designer Axel Vervoordt's show Proportio is offers an at-times magical take on space and sacred geometries. Artists such as Fred Sandback, Ha Chong Hyun, Robert Ryman and Richard Long are gently contrasted with Old Masters and rich decor. A rare visual feast – and as Vervoordt is a dealer, those interested in buying can get in touch.

18) Dansaekhwa – This is an until very recently underappreciated Korean art movement that began in the 1970s and whose most famous member is Lee Ufan. Perhaps soon to catch up is Ha Chong Hyun, the star of this show, whose minimal but textured canvases are made by pushing paint first through common hemp canvases – cheaply available at the time – then across the surface. Somehow at once earthy and spiritual.

19) Slip of the Tongue – A show at Pinault's Punta della Dogana museum, curated by Vietnamese/Danish star artist Danh Vo, who also represents Denmark in the Danish Pavilion. Among the many highlights are Fischli & Weiss' Untitled Tree Stump, the several works by David Hammons, Jean-Luc Moulène's garden sculpture mash-ups, and Vo's own cross-cultural meditations on history and change.

20) Nástio Mosquito – An independent exhibition of three video pieces by the irrepressible Angolan artist, who also works in music, film and design. Mosquito evokes many of the themes of globalisation evident in the Biennale with infectious energy, humour and a healthy sense of

confrontation. Clearly an artist to watch.

For the bestselling exhibitions during the Venice Biennale, check back on Thursday May 28. Also, don't miss curator Okwui Enwezor's ideas on how to have the perfect weekend while you're there.

www.labiennale.org.

URL : <http://howtospendit.ft.com/art/83681-the-best-of-the-venice-biennale-2015>