

Trouillott, Terence, *National Pavilions Review, Part 2: A Miasma of Despair and a Glimmer of Hope*, *frieze Critics' Guide*, 17 April 2024

FRIEZE

National Pavilions Review, Part 2: A Miasma of Despair and a Glimmer of Hope

From Julien Creuzet's multimedia mastery to Kapwani Kiwanga's beaded presentation, a tapestry of sensory experiences permeates the Venice Biennale 2024

BY TERENCE TROUILLOTT IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 17 APR 24

In his essay for this month's issue of *frieze*, Irish author Colm Tóibín remarks that 'no one in Venice likes a *flâneur*' – an observation that is as true as it is ironic, given that ambling tourists make up an overwhelming majority of the city. That said, I took Tóibín's platitude as scripture, endeavouring to manoeuvre the circuitous streets of Venice with efficient precision, all while dodging other *flâneurs*. Despite this, I cannot wholly shake off a moniker that describes all those – myself included – who are privileged enough to visit the city every two years to see the biennial first hand.

It's impossible not to look up in this city. To marvel at the architecture of Venice is to indulge in an unapologetically mawkish experience – to stop and smell the roses, as it were. It's an adage that rings true quite literally throughout the cluster of national pavilions at this year's biennial, where the olfactory permeates the Giardini both sensorially and thematically, to varying degrees of success.

I first encountered this aromatic phenomenon as I approached the Dutch pavilion – something I did with extreme circumspection, since I am wary of any project involving Renzo Martens and the specious form of social practice he deploys in works such as *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008), which implied that the Democratic Republic of Congo markets its poverty as a natural resource. Nonetheless, I was curious. The facade and entrance were covered with splatters of palm oil, while the gallery itself reeked of bitter notes of chocolate. 'The International Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred' showcases the work of Congolese collective Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC), a group with whom Martens has been involved for some years. The sculptures on display – carvings of a variety of Congolese effigies – are made using clay from the forests around Lusanga and recast in cacao and palm oil in Amsterdam. The works hark back to the extractive practices surrounding both material goods in the region and the repatriation of profits to the Democratic Republic of Congo, with CATPC having succeeded, in the words of the exhibition literature, 'in reclaiming 200 hectares of confiscated palm-oil plantations', in an attempt to establish a more sustainable relationship to the land. Regardless of this success, the space has a profoundly sombre mood, amplified by the saccharine odour of palm oil and cacao that is somehow also reminiscent of burnt rubber.

Yuko Mohri's Japanese pavilion offers a similar, albeit more formal, experience, where a scent both citrusy and foul – a miasma of rotting fruits – wafts through the space accompanying the artist's bricolage of light- and sound-generating kinetic objects in a *gesamtkunstwerk* of bodily senses. Ironically, the Korean pavilion, which was the only presentation unambiguously themed around smell, was also the most baffling. Koo Jeong A's 'Odorama Cities' – for which the artist devised scents intended to re-create the smells of certain cities based on residents' testimonials – was extremely faint, overpowered by the aroma of the Douglas fir that had been used to create a custom parquet for the space.

Arguably one of the better presentations in the Giardini was Julien Creuzet's multimedia installation at the French pavilion, 'Attila cataract your source at the feet of the green peaks will end up in the great sea blue abyss we drowned in the tidal tears of the



Yuko Mohri 'Compose', 2024, exhibition view. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia

moon'. I was quite sceptical of what his exhibition would offer, having been underwhelmed by his presentation of wiry, abstract sculptures at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2021, for which he won the prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize. Here, however, I was blown away by Creuzet's sculptural masterpieces, from his familiar sinewy, hanging objects wrapped in spools of colourful thread to his new bronze-cast, four-legged vessels filled with water and lavender, emanating a delightful, near-intoxicating aroma. The installation also comprises sound and video, with large screens throughout, including a massive one outside that wraps around the entryway. The imagery is frenetic, nautical-themed and fanciful – a musing on the artist's Caribbean identity as an *outré-mer* (overseas) citizen of France in Martinique and a deafening proclamation of otherness as superpower. Feeling more mature than in previous years, Creuzet's brand of formalism reveals an artist achieving great range and subtlety.

Unfortunately, as an American, I was profoundly unimpressed by Jeffrey Gibson's show at the US pavilion, and not because of a lack of effort on the part of the artist, who obviously pulled out all the stops. For me, the cryptic messages on Indigenous resistances in America, camouflaged in the work by Gibson's signature rainbow-coloured chevron pattern, fell absolutely flat. The bejewelled totems and sculpture, a nod to Choctaw Nation beadwork, are without a doubt impressive to see but, overall, I wanted much more from an artist I had high hopes for at this year's biennial.

What did gladly meet my expectations, however, was Kapwani Kiwanga's exquisite presentation at the Canadian pavilion, 'Trinket', which coincidentally also uses beads as its primary material. Upon entering the space, visitors are greeted by a giant veil of blue beads cascading over the entrance, while lining the walls is a dazzling array of colourful beads carefully hung to create a wondrous display of crystalline light and luscious gradients of hues as you move throughout. As with many of the artist's works, however, the installation's luminous beauty is complicated by a troubled past. The beads that hang on the walls are *conterie*, made on the nearby Venetian Island of Murano and loaded with cross-cultural significance. Considered to be one of the 'most important Venetian exports in African, Asian and North American markets', according to the show's accompanying literature, the beads were used as a form of currency 'to buy African commodities, such as ivory, gold and precious wood', as well as to purchase enslaved people in West Africa. In this brilliant meditation on the history of global trade and how hegemony and extractive capitalism leads certain objects to be valued above human lives, Kiwanga underscores just how easily and quickly such problematic histories can be erased by the seductive gleam of a tiny glass bead.