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THE DEAD RISE AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

*Stifled by a weird and desperate present, the show finds some
life in the treasures of the past.*

By Jackson Arn

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Physical fatigue is always a factor in criticism, but at the Venice Biennale, the world's most prestigious recurring art exhibition, it picks up a few seats on the private jury of taste. The event, showcasing hundreds of artists and patronized by hundreds of thousands of people, spans two main locations: the lush parkland of the Giardini, created by Napoleon, and the cluster of retired shipyards and armories known as the Arsenale. Each day of press previews, my black sneakers gained a layer of whitish dust, as though mummified by travel, and my eyes burned with a thousand sightings of the same pink tote bag on everybody's arm. (By the time I left, it seemed as Venetian as a Bellini.) Gravity tugs harder than usual here. No dosage of caffeine is enough. Successful art works sense their audience's aches and respond with exquisite tact.

The limitations of the human body may well be the Biennale's true subject, but at this installment, the sixtieth since 1895, the explicit theme is otherness. The show's title is "Foreigners Everywhere," which at its least trivial signals an emphasis on the creations of the marginalized. In the eighty-seven national pavilions that make up half of the event, many of the featured artists are Indigenous; at the Central Exhibition, which constitutes the other half, a good chunk hail from the Global South and a majority are deceased, the past being the biggest foreign country of all. You might want to complain about the preponderance of death in a show that is implicitly about the health of contemporary art. But any curatorial choice that gives us fewer immersive rooms and preening enfants terribles doesn't seem so bad to me.

How could it, when there are still artists like Affandi to discover? A movie-theatre clerk who taught himself how to paint in the nineteen-thirties, already renowned in his native Indonesia, he is represented in the Central Exhibition by a glorious shriek of a self-portrait, in wormy streaks of yellow and green. Adriano Pedrosa, the Biennale's curator and the artistic director of the São Paulo Museum of Art, excels at connecting artists separated by vast chasms of time and geography—walking around, I sensed that if Affandi, who died in 1990, had taught himself to weave, he might have made art like Shalom Kufakwatenzi, a young Zimbabwean with two textile works in the show. (At times, Affandi very nearly *did* weave with paint, squeezing thick lines of pigment straight onto the canvas and arranging them with his hands.) There's the same bright, unapologetic raggedness, the stuff of life frozen in mid-wriggle.

Many other fine pieces in the Central Exhibition are textile-based: a dense, earthy slab of threads by the Colombian Olga de Amaral, who turns ninety-two this year; a selection of embroidered burlap pieces by the anonymous Chileans known as Arpilleristas; large, cool compositions by Susanne Wenger, who spent most of her long life in Nigeria, practicing the Yoruba religion and mastering batik, the art of wax-resist dyeing. Her pieces, which show mortals and deities floating side by side, stick to the same spiky patterns and subdued hues but never retrace their steps; you could imagine them continuing forever, and might well want them to. If not, walk a few feet to the exhibition's other main batik specialist, Şàngódàré Gbádéḡesin Àjàlá, who passed away in 2021. His creations are as religiously inclined as Wenger's—he was her adopted son—but with a livelier clamor of bodies pressed together. There's almost too much to savor; the intricate coloring, combined



Several works in "Compose," Yuko Mohri's installation for the Japanese pavilion, evoke the leaks in Tokyo's metro system. Art work by Yuko Mohri / Courtesy the artist / Project Fulfill Art Space / mother's tankstation / Yutaka Kikutake Gallery / Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; Photograph by kugeyasuhide

with pale spiderweb shading, gives the figures a pimpled texture I can't remember seeing in art before and now can't stop noticing everywhere. Ajálá, Wenger, and the rest of the fibre brigade may be the snappiest retort to the gripe that there are too many dead artists this year: when we're dealing with textiles, one of the oldest visual art forms and still backlogged with brilliance, the distinction between new and old stops mattering so much. Good is good, even if it takes decades for anyone to notice.

Is the sixtieth Venice Biennale a good exhibition, then? There's superb stuff to be sniffed out, although with hundreds of artists from around the world there had really better be. The Giardini and the Arsenale contain more work than several respectable museums put together—and that's not even counting various collateral exhibitions, plus the handful of national pavilions scattered across the rest of the city. Lines can be nasty and outbursts nastier still. On the first day of previews, a guard sent me to a ticketing booth to haggle with an attendant. She asked me who I was writing for; the words had barely left my mouth before the man behind me started cursing me, this magazine, America, and Joe Biden.

Granted, there are things worth getting upset about here, with good and bad art works talking over each other for entire rooms at a time. Peak braying is reached in a single tall gallery that Pedrosa has stuffed like a storage unit with abstract paintings by thirty-seven artists, most of them making their Biennale début. You can always try to make up for neglect by rushing lots of strong material through at once, but this doesn't necessarily do the material any favors: plenty of abstraction needs time and space to bloom in the beholder's eye, and none of the paintings in this room are permitted much of either, with the result being that nothing much blooms at all. Blame the curation, blame the inherent dilemma of the logjam—either way, it's the one portion of the Central Exhibition which strikes me as an outright failure. A Rothko couldn't thrive in a place like this.

The most obvious way to stand out in a big, loud multitude is to be louder, and loudness, with a side helping of eeriness, was more or less the *métier* of the mid-century Italian artist Domenico Gnoli. His sprawling painting of a woman's shoe looks as rough as sandpaper, with two vampire fangs of red fabric poking down from its top edge—it has to be one of the most calmly odd things in the Central Exhibition this year, and also one of the most purely pleasurable, pulling you in with the friendly yank of a pop song. Gnoli's approach isn't so far from that of the Mexican Ana Segovia, whose "Pos' se acabó este cantar" is one of this Biennale's more memorable film pieces. Panting with hot color and haywire machismo, it features two Mexican cowboys, or *charros*, standing millimetres apart, their every move swollen to monumentality by the camera's closeness. Flirtation is hard to distinguish from violence, sexy thrashing being rather similar to the angry kind. You may long for answers, or learn to enjoy the twinges of comedy and menace.

With fewer than half of the Central Exhibition artists presently breathing, the national pavilions have double the usual pressure to sum up the state of contemporary art. Some countries always participate, though others, like Ethiopia and Tanzania, are here for the first time, and another, Russia, declined to take part and lent its empty pavilion to Bolivia. On my second day of pavilion-going, a P.R. person told me that the decision was only a tiny sub-scheme in Russia's ongoing bid for Bolivia's mining reserves. Oscar Wilde thought that all art was quite useless; whether it can win Vladimir Putin a bottomless supply of lithium remains to be seen.

If this Biennale can be trusted, though, the state of contemporary art is rumbly. At first, I thought the noises were coming from thunderclouds, or my own gut, but no—ambient echoes score a significant number of the national pavilions this year, enough to give the entire show a low, uniform, very important murmur, italics for the ears. It's the right soundtrack for pavilions that seem locked in a deadly serious arms race of whimsy. Visit a few and fun quickly hardens into formula. You wait in line, drone-serenaded. You go in and immediately some whatsit mugs you: a gaggle of masked figures rolling around in muck, a rain forest of rainbow tendrils, an arrangement of rainbow beads, a wrecked boat, a dead giraffe.

The giraffe—actually a spotted hut-like structure, modelled on the carcass of a giraffe that died in the Prague Zoo in the nineteen-fifties—can be found in the Czech pavilion, courtesy of Eva Kotátková. Some informal polling suggests that it's one of the more popular pavilions this year, which I suspect has a lot to do with how nice it feels to squat inside the giraffe hut and rest for a minute. When you stand up and return to the rumbling outside, the visceral weirdness fades fast—just another interchangeable phrase in the big Biennale Mad Lib. A welcome exception is **Yuko Mohri's** installation in the Japanese pavilion. Several of her pieces transform the space into a cavern of dripping water, a nod to the leaks, worsened by a series of earthquakes, that have dogged Tokyo's metro system for years. The most striking works star rotting fruit, which has been poked with electrodes that translate moisture into—you guessed it—drone noises. It's no less weird than a dead giraffe, of course, but for once the weirdness doesn't feel like a weapon aimed at the viewer. The tone is calmer, serene in its indifference; nature and technology are locked in a Platonic dialogue that we mortals can only eavesdrop on. Mohri doesn't demand your shock, and so earns your interest.

Good? Bad? When you're deep in the trance state brought on by pavilion-hopping, it's probably more honest to think in terms of what works and what doesn't. Two days after our first meeting, the man who yelled at me walked right by without showing any sign of recognition—too preoccupied with the forty-sixth President, I

suppose, or possibly with the timeless mysteries of art. Maybe he'd just come from the German pavilion, the apotheosis of post-good art at this year's Biennale. It contains multiple offerings, including a video by Yael Bartana that crosscuts between woodland witchcraft and a spaceship, and an unclassifiable piece by Ersan Mondtag that can be read as a wretched, furious monument to the artist's grandfather, who died of asbestos poisoning. Alone, each piece might not have fared so well—Bartana's might have been too woozy-cheesy, Mondtag's too self-definingly sombre. Yet they somehow unlock each other. Wandering through Mondtag's re-creation of his grandfather's world, complete with performers and mounds of dust, I caught a glimpse of C.G.I. outer space, and the obscenity of this old family tragedy jabbed at me like it was mine.

The real standouts here are the understated pieces. The jurors seem to have felt so, anyway, when they awarded the Golden Lion to Archie Moore, a First Nations Australian artist who covered the walls of his national pavilion with a seemingly infinite family tree, scratched in chalk like a school project. Some of the entries are blurred, and most are too dense or high to make out in the dim light. In the center of the room sits a stack of redacted documents concerning dead First Nations Australians, separated from its surroundings by a ring of water—an island in an island. Like Mohri, Moore seems to be holding something back, and, in a Biennale full of hard sells, that works. But even soft-sell art can seem overdone. A few days before Moore's victory, a sign outside the Israeli national pavilion announced that it wouldn't open until a ceasefire and a hostage agreement were reached. In all probability, Israel's will be the only national pavilion that anyone is still talking about in two years. By then, though, the Biennale will be back, and Venice will fill with new rumbling, the lingua franca of the contemporary art world: part purr, part groan, part long, uncertain *hmmm*. ♦