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INTERNATIONAL EDITION

June 15, 2013 LAST

Preview 10 Pavilions From the 55th Venice Biennale



Modern Painters June 2013

The national pavilions of the 55th Venice Biennale are spread between the Giardini and the Arsenale, flanking the international exhibition, this year called the “Encyclopedic Palace,” curated by Massimiliano Gioni.

Thorny questions return as regularly as the glitzy biennial itself. The Venice model—harking back to the 19th century’s world expos where envoys of various countries gathered to flaunt their latest achievements—has been passed down like an heirloom. How relevant is this format to a globalized art world characterized by ceaseless traveling, relocation, and displacement? How can artists be representative of their

countries when so many nations are now defined by their cultural diversity? Should the pavilions be abandoned altogether for a more progressive and international approach? If so, what would that be?

Still, the old format dies hard. More countries than ever are keen to secure a place in the Venetian sun. From 2003 to 2013, 32 nations have been added to the Biennale, with this year bringing the inclusion for the first time of Angola, the Bahamas, Bahrain, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Kuwait, the Maldives, Paraguay, Tuvalu, and the Holy See. Venice Biennale president Paolo Baratta suggests that countries want to join “to show that they exist, not as political entities, but as entities capable of being participants in the world of culture.”

Contemporary art's new status as mass entertainment—or marketing strategy—has also no doubt played a role, particularly for countries with dubious human rights records. Since 1998, the Biennale's appointed curator focuses solely on a large-scale group show, the international exhibition. With more than 150 artists—almost twice as many as in the two previous editions—Gioni's proposition is ambitious. The show borrows its title from the Palazzo Enciclopedico, a museum that Italian-American eccentric Marino Auriti imagined and, in 1955, designed (and patented) to host all human knowledge. Auriti intended the building to be 136 stories high and to occupy 16 blocks in Washington, D.C. Although it was never built, a detailed maquette, on loan from the American Folk Art Museum in New York, features prominently in the exhibition, alongside several other equally intriguing objects such as Carl Jung's Red Book, Haitian voodoo flags, and tantric paintings.

The show, he explains, explores several questions: "How do we give forms to the images in our heads? And even before that, how come humans carry images in their heads? What is the space left for these images in a world more and more colonized by artificial and external images?" Many contemporary art heavy hitters are contributing to Gioni's sweeping investigations. Cindy Sherman is curating a show within a show dedicated to the body. Paul McCarthy, Sarah Lucas, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, and Albert Oehlen—together with young artists now garnering attention, like Ryan Trecartin, Ed Atkins, and Helen Marten—are among those who will fill this "palace of all knowledge."

Says Gioni: "It's a modest proposal to look at artists less as these superheroes who make beautiful things that are worth a lot of money, but more as people who are revealing different ways of dealing with a fundamental question—as banal and as cheesy as it sounds—the need to construct images, either as a way to fight against time or as a way to structure knowledge through them."

To help you navigate the extravaganza that is Venice, we here preview 11 pavilions. —*Coline Milliard*

Australia

Singapore-born Simryn Gill worked with curator Catherine de Zegher to develop her site-specific exhibition “Here art grows on trees.” Consisting of large-scale drawings, photographs, and Gill’s signature collections of found objects, the exhibition explores subjectivity while referring to the in-between zone inhabited by the artist; this is a place of negotiation described by de Zegher as “intertidal.” Gill, who lives in Malaysia and Australia, brings together fragments of text formed into a swarm of insectlike creatures, a cast-steel maquette of a half moon, photographs of leaves, and precisely curated collections of found objects. It all promotes what de Zegher calls “a space of negotiation between the small and the global, between nature and industry, as it reveals an understanding of the interconnectedness of all in a world in flux.” Although the relationship between nature and industry is of special importance to Gill, she also explores the associations between the beach and the street, inside and outside, the house and the neighborhood, the ephemeral and the corporeal, East and West. “While modernity has promoted a linear view of the world, Gill promotes a more cyclical view,” de Zegher says. “She reveals that we are just a section in the chain, interdependent among each other as well as the environment—a position we have to take on in the 21st century.”

Artistically and culturally, Gill occupies a place of compromise and transition that heavily relies on the consistent and generic minutiae of everyday life to create a sense of belonging. Using what is fragmented and segmented to express the importance of the ordinary and the quotidian, Gill initiates a modest but precise negotiation of this transitional territory. —*Nicholas Forrest*