

Exhibitions

Venice Biennale

Various locations, Venice
11th May–24th November

by MARTHA BARRATT

Water vapour puffs across the doors of the Giardini's central pavilion, which houses one half of Ralph Rugoff's curated display for the 58th Venice Biennale, *May You Live in Interesting Times*.¹ On entering the building, visitors are funnelled into *Spectra III* (2008), a corridor of fluorescent light, from which they emerge, blinking and a little damp, into the exhibition. This sensorial welcome, from Lara Favaretto – whose mist is titled *Thinking head* (2018) – and Ryoji Ikeda respectively, is in line with what a visitor might expect from Rugoff's exhibitions. In his role as Director of the Hayward Gallery, London, he is well known for producing exhibitions that are accessible and that privilege experience (*Psycho Buildings*, 2008), interaction (*Ernesto Neto*, 2010) and the

funny or whimsical (*Pipilotti Rist*, 2011; *Martin Creed*, 2014). His appointment as Curator at Venice signalled the chance to create a display less po-faced or exclusive than previous iterations, which would be put together with a degree of professionalism in installation. For visitors from the United Kingdom it also promised the opportunity to see lesser-known or emerging British artists in the context of the international stage (Rugoff is the first curator working in the UK to be selected). His approach to organising the spaces of the Giardini and Arsenale is novel: he has created two exhibitions, or 'propositions', each showing works by the same list of artists.

The tone appears to change dramatically at the Arsenale, where the other half of the show opens with an enormous penis. Or perhaps it is a nuclear warhead, grasped between the legs of a mean clown, who faces another (Fig.25). This grisly entrance is courtesy of George Condo, whose pair of grinning silver jokers, over

four metres tall, guard Christian Marclay's monumental collage of war films. Playing simultaneously, forty-eight films are arranged in concentric slivers within a single screen, their soundtracks merging in a fuzzy din. Just enough of each is visible to occasionally see a bit of a face, or to get a sense of the scenery, but the overriding message seems nothing more urgent than that most war films favour a palette of muddy beige.

Marclay's film might stand as a metaphor for this year's curated exhibitions. Despite the bipartite structure – 'intended to evoke the parallel information landscapes that define our increasingly polarised public discourse' (p.30) – there is no indication of what these two positions are (or how they differ), a reflection perhaps of Rugoff's decision not to introduce a 'profound theme' to the displays. On the wall behind Condo's clowns, for instance, is a self-portrait by the South African artist Zanele Muholi, a photograph blown up as

25. *Double Elvis*, by George Condo. 2019. Acrylic, gesso, metallic paint and pigment stick on linen. Installation view. (Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia; photograph Andrea Avezù).





26. *Morning studio*, by Nicole Eisenman. 2016. Canvas, 167.6 by 210.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; exh. La Biennale di Venezia).

wallpaper to several metres high. Muholi's images are an important part of her activist work for LGBTQ+ and Black rights – and therefore a surprising choice for a curator who writes in his curator's statement that 'art does not exercise its forces in the domain of politics'. Condo's paintings meanwhile court popular controversy – a 'banned' Kanye West album cover, his cabbage-patch portraits of the Queen – to enormous commercial success. These works occupy opposite ends of art's relationship to politics, art history, the market and distribution.² And so, placed together in this way, the two works – Pop culture versus subculture; macho and the queer; the institutional and the activist – almost drown one another out, each reducing the other to its most banal.

Eschewing the political, Rugoff describes art's function as a social one, arguing in the press release that presenting different perspectives compels us to think and 'make connections', to 'look askance at all unquestioned categories, concepts and subjectivities'. This determinedly vague approach (what is an unquestioned

subjectivity, and what might be gained from looking askance at one?) allows Rugoff to gather works that reflect his vision of what today's art looks like without stifling them with overbearing curatorial frameworks. The question, then, is how this ambivalence might be productive: when everything is played at once, what emerges from the beige?

Among the displays, certain themes inevitably coalesce. There is an interest in art history – artists who reference, play with or subvert it, as well as with art's most traditional forms. The first gallery in the Giardini, for instance, is dominated by big paintings and sculptures. It is a slick and spacious display, which benefits from Rugoff's decision to slim down the list of participating artists to just 79 (from the 120 included in 2017). Nicole Eisenman's canvases present wildly different worlds – a man plays a recorder in a boat lined with teeth, adrift in a wasted Dalí-esque landscape; a couple entwined on a sofa are more relatable, as they flick their cigarettes into an empty tuna tin (Fig.26). The canvases surround sculptures by Jean-Luc Moulène, some arranged about the floor, a couple on plinths. There

is a papery death-mask protruding from the side of a car, the whole thing cast in bronze; a terracotta Magdalen figure, whose clasped hands have been severed and presented a little way from her body; a glossy polyhedron like a constructivist gemstone; and a human-height reaper's scythe attached to the leg of a bright blue plastic chair. Both these artists make their work using bits of things, references and styles piled together from art history, pop culture and the everyday. Style is not tied to authorship but a material to work with.

This kind of work sits well within Rugoff's conceit of showing the same list of artists across two spaces. Eisenman, for instance, has two strong, very different displays: in addition to the pictures in the Giardini, in the Arsenale she shows a collection of large sculptural heads, Paolozzi-esque gargoyles that are macho, but playfully so, and knowingly anachronistic. To understand how the two displays could have been made by the same artist, therefore, requires close attention and visual sensitivity. And that is a strength of Rugoff's structure: it gives the visitor something to hold on to, to look for, amid the vast halls of very different art. It is also successful for those artists who are relatively new to the international stage, or who make quieter works rewarded by multiple encounters, such as Jesse Darling. In a corner of the Arsenale a toilet for

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the disabled (Darling's *Comfort break*; Fig.27) seems to buckle on a distended leg, a tenderly anthropomorphised object that is bolstered by seeing Darling's objects in the Giardini, including an archive box on too-long legs, caught in a foal-like skitter.³ Inevitably, the tactic is not always successful, as with Ed Atkins, who presents a characteristic big-budget, avatar-led theatre in the Arsenale, but has scattered some acrylics of man-headed spiders about the Giardini. At once insubstantial and overbearing, the cartoonish heads recur in most rooms, peeping around corners, creating a sort of rambler's trail of self-referential signage.

The spectacle, whether of violence or controversy, is another uncomfortable thread running through the shows. Most fiercely debated is *Barca nostra*, a rusting boat from Lampedusa in which around eight hundred people died trying to reach Italy, which Christoph Büchel dragged across the country to be beached at the back end of the Arsenale, outside the café. The curator's decision to allow this – and the Venetian authorities' willingness to pay for it – has been criticised by many, but the work has been defended by some as an evocative reminder of colonialism, exploitation and hypocrisy. Putting aside questions of taste, and the well-rehearsed ethical

issues over the representation of the other, the question seems to be how it functions, or not, as a work of art. What does Büchel's ship contribute to thinking about art as a form of memorial or critique? Or indeed about the migrant crisis?

The difficulty of Büchel's ship can be drawn out by comparison with another work on view, Teresa Margolles's *Muro Ciudad Juárez* (Fig.28), a wall brought brick-by-brick to the Giardini from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a centre of gang violence, against which four young people were executed, probably by the Juárez drugs cartel. Both are material relics of violent death, transported from poorer to wealthy countries by internationally successful artists to display tragedies of vulnerable people in an art setting. But their merit, as contributions to art and thought, could not be further apart. For decades, Margolles has worked with the community in Ciudad Juárez to combat femicide and drug violence, and she has done so through an activist art practice that is informed by art's established role in the city.⁴ The form of the work, a minutely reconstructed readymade (Margolles is trained in forensic science), is integral to its meaning. Her exactitude is an indictment of local police – their corruption and failure fully to investigate crimes against victims of gang violence – and part of the artist's

27. *Comfort break*, by Jesse Darling. (Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia; photograph Italo Rondinella).

prolonged exploration into how the physical infrastructure of a city can be used as testimony to otherwise hidden, daily violence.⁵ The wall also recalls the minimalist – the modular, the (neutral) readymade – and in doing so places the work within an artistic, historic context, implicating art history and its neutralising gaze.

Furthermore, in the Giardini, *Muro Ciudad Juárez* is placed opposite Sun Yuan's and Peng Yu's *Can't help myself* (2016), a robotic arm that sweeps a constantly spreading circle of a red liquid, mimicking blood, back into the centre. Placed elsewhere, it might be funny, anthropomorphised in its Sisyphean task. Here, however, it rather morbidly recalls Margolles's work in the 2009 Biennale, in which she washed the floors of the Mexican pavilion with blood collected from the Mexico City morgue, while distributing laminated calling cards, illustrated with gunshot, to visitors of the preview, stamped 'card to cut cocaine'. By referencing this earlier work the current display reminds visitors of the proximity of the international networks of corruption that create Margolles's victims, and which, by association, might allow for such gargantuan projects as Yan's and Kee's robotic arm, or indeed Büchel's big boat. Context is crucially important to Margolles's art and is materially visible within the work. It exists within a critical framework, expanding notions of what defines a memorial or monument and the complex relationship between art and politics. By comparison, the crudeness of Büchel's gesture is clear: a readymade presented without critical or historic engagement with its form; a conceptually flimsy work of art that does not justify its cost, either monetarily or in terms of the exclusion and exploitation (through a lack of engagement) of its subjects.

The most traditional art forms, painting and sculpture, are well represented. There are some brilliantly energetic punkish cat scraps by Jill Mulleady in the Arsenale, more figuration from Henry Taylor and some characteristic swirly canvases from Julie Mehretu. Sculpture is everywhere, especially in the abstract curving

shapes of Liu Wei, Nairy Baghramian and Anicka Yi, and in combinations of readymade and fabricated objects by Maria Loboda, Gabriel Rico and Nabuqi. The deserving winner of this year's Golden Lion for best artist was Arthur Jafa, who presented *The White Album*, a film of a CGI, skeletal Iggy Pop cut between Youtube videos and tender shots of a woman working a booth at an art fair, to interrogate racial politics in the United States and in art. It includes a rousing confessional video from a reformed white supremacist; a chilling sequence of a man illustrating how to conceal a machine gun, an automatic handgun and several rounds of ammo under a pair of jeans and thin T-shirt. It is an urgent, masterly sequence that connects the work and the viewer with the market on which the film depends and the climate of fear in which viewer, film and art market operate.

Although the work shown at the Arsenale tends to be bigger, in line with the space constraints of the Giardini,

28. Muro Ciudad Juárez, by Teresa Margolles. 2010. Concrete blocks. Installation view (Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia; photograph Francesco Galli).

and perhaps darker in tone or subject-matter, for the most part it is difficult to ascertain what constitutes the two 'propositions' that govern the split between the two venues. Big-name or newly fashionable artists dominate both pavilions, the majority depending upon substantial gallery support, since the Biennale itself provides so little. Compared with last year's heavily criticised display by Christine Macel, Rugoff's is certainly slicker. The work is well-installed, with plenty of space and excellent labelling. The catalogue is also superb, with short, well-written texts that are notable among such publications for their clarity. However, Macel put forward a defined, historical thesis of art's function in society, illustrated by much little-known or experimental work, whereas Rugoff avoids such risks by presenting mainly well-known artists without any overarching narrative. As with the mega-displays at Frieze or Art Basel, it can be difficult to engage

with individual works when they are presented out of context and without an alternative conceptual framework. And in mirroring the viewing conditions of an art fair in this way, perhaps it is the most honest exhibition the Biennale has seen for some time.

¹ The national pavilions at this year's Biennale will be discussed in separate reviews on *Burlington Contemporary*, our online platform for contemporary art, <http://burlingtoncontemporary.org.uk/>

² 5,000 copies of Muholi's self-portraits were printed to accompany exhibitions across seven countries; a neo-Cubist painting by Condo recently sold for \$6.16 million. He has also produced work for luxury products or celebrities, notably painting a sex scene on Kim Kardashian's Birkin bag.

³ See M. Barratt: 'Venice Biennale', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 157 (2015), pp.652-55; and *idem*: 'Venice Biennale' *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 159 (2017), pp.667-68.

⁴ See S. Howe: 'Blasting through the city: combating feminicide through art in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico', 2017, available at http://havic.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Howe_2017_Dean%27s%20and%20Chancellor%27s%20Award.pdf, accessed 12th June 2019.

⁵ See, for example, Margolles's photographic series *En torno a la pérdida (Around Loss)* (2009-13), which documents abandoned houses in Ciudad Juárez.

