

Venice Biennale round-up: a rainbow thread of optimism

Jackie Wullschläger

A pack of caged Dobermans howl at visitors to the German pavilion, hurling themselves against the wire netting where acrobatic performers in black insouciantly balance to artist Anne Imhof's instructions. Inside, Imhof has replaced the floor with a slippery glass platform threatened from below by flaming cigarettes, and makes nervous outsiders of us all.

Competing with the dogs, the French have pianists on baby grands, drummers, an opera singer soaring to Puccini, in a pavilion transformed by Xavier Veilhan and Christian Marclay into supremely elegant recording studios open to everyone, interspersed with fantastical cardboard models of Venetian lutes and rock guitars: a metaphor for harmony of voices, and as invitingly chic as a Left Bank bar.

National identity remains a piquant, near illicit charm in today's Venice. Embodying the geopolitical order in 1895, when the Biennale was launched, the British pavilion stands atop the main Giardini drag, flanked by France and Germany. Between their super-lively performances, [Phyllida Barlow's](#) deliberately clumsy, solid, stolid, mashed-up columns, outsize cardboard loo rolls and randomly nailed boards cannot but look an old-fashioned embarrassment. Her piece is called "Folly", but no conceptual chat about collapse can save it.



side, immediately confronted by a sculpture — boat? Whale? Architectural wreck? — in Bradford’s characteristic bleached, soaked, painted paper, with blotchy encrustations and gestural marks across disjointed surfaces held with roofing tiles. This is “Spoiled Foot”, so large that it forces you into corners before you emerge into galleries of inky black paintings with the depths of water.

The subterranean mood, caught between ruin and discovery, equally referencing Venice and America’s new political reality, continues in the rotunda, with walls ripped and sculpted paper pouring from the roof in serpentine black twists — an accompanying sculpture is called “Medusa”. It is also evident in grand gold-red textural abstractions that are by turns frightening — the hint of a split bloody head “Go Tell It on the Mountain” — and elated, in “105194” and “Tomorrow is Another Day”, suggesting both cells and galaxies. So base materials are transcended by the alchemy of hope, and the experience of this single pavilion is worth a visit to Venice.

To November 26, labiennale.org

Best of the rest in Venice

There are nearly 30 pavilions off-site from the Giardini and Arsenale at this year’s Biennale, and as many collateral and independent exhibitions. Best of these is the [Philip Guston show](#); here are five more worth crossing the city for.

James Lee Byars: Golden Tower

Campo San Vio



A curvaceous nude by the waterside, a steadfast, stylised cocktail waiter, Trinidadian backcloths of luscious sprinkled colour, charcoal lines as assured and dynamic as any that Ofili has made: this delicate series about metamorphosis and transformation, romance and classical restraint, dream and reality, is good enough to call to mind Picasso's Volland Suite. Unabashedly decorative, distilling Ofili's grand themes with lightness and grace, it is a perfect launch for Victoria Miro's Venice gallery.

Hadassa Goldvicht: The House of Life

Fondazione Querini Stampalia



'The House of Life'

Far from the madding crowd in the labyrinth of streets behind St Marks, this Israeli artist's quiet, lyrical multichannel video installation asks big questions about fear of mortality, the nature of myth and art's striving for the eternal through the compelling personality of Aldo Izzo, 86-year-old keeper of Venice's Jewish cemeteries, former captain of a merchant vessel and turtle collector. This unlikely contemporary Charon transports us, with humour and pathos, through collective memories and Venetian history to a strange liminal world between the living and the dead.

Photographs: Awakening/Getty Images; Vincenzo Pinto/AFP/Getty Images; Marco Secchi/Getty Images