

Venice Biennale 2019 review – preaching to the converted

The Observer

Venice Biennale 2019

There is much to praise from Ghana, India, France, and a stunning international pavilion. Less admirable is a true horror on the Arsenale...

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Star of the show... Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute), 2019 by Martin Puryear outside the US pavilion in Venice. Photograph: Andrea Merola/EPA

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he tide is rising. The ice caps are melting. The oceans are awash with trash. That is the main message from the Giardini in Venice, where the 2019 Biennale has just opened. But apparently we should not abandon all hope. For there is always birdsong, and another dance class.

This is what the international pavilions seem to be saying, over and over again. If I saw one doomed pavilion, the floor wrenched up, the walls torn down (ever so politely) to reveal the gardens beyond, I saw four. The entrance to the French pavilion is through the dug-out earth below, sending you back to nature. The Spanish pavilion sends you outside to witness the threatened vegetation beneath spouts of bright acid rain. In the German pavilion, a toxic brown stain pours down the walls to a thrumming soundtrack of inchoate menace. There are barren rocks everywhere.

Vapour steams from the roof of the main international pavilion, plunging the gardens into Whistlerian fog. Vapour pours from the roof of the French pavilion too. Someone really needs to keep an eye out for these repetitions. In the Korean pavilion, they're teaching you ancient and modern dance steps in a sequence of captivating films. In Switzerland, the dance spools backwards, like some Michael Jackson pastiche, on a screen big enough for Leicester Square.

These moves are a retort to reactionary forces of every sort, or so we are told. The same is more obviously true of the transgender and non-binary dance class in Brazil, where they're jaunting their Lycra-clad curves to intoxicating music in a film called *Swinguerra* (get it?). Birds made of porcelain, glass or

fabric alight on branches, sometimes accompanied by recorded song, sometimes actually alive and fluttering through art's version of nature as hopeful metaphors made literal.

One of them, snow-white and momentarily perched on a bit of rusty wire next to a dead bird, a cigarette stub in its beak, stares anxiously back at visitors to the first section of Laure Prouvost's French pavilion. All around it is a sea-green tide of cast glass, inevitably bobbing with discarded phones and bottles. This preaching to the converted, however, is only a prelude to an epic film in which Prouvost's visions of the sea arrive in mesmerising waves.



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Immigrants sing songs of yearning to the ocean, through which fish speed, free as these people never are. A squid arrives in Venice, slithering up the steps to this very pavilion, which gradually fills with animals and songbirds. Acrobats, dancers and magicians perform a kind of liberation ballet – some

apparently spilling out of the screen, somehow, to emerge right here among us – culminating in the euphoric sight of a man leaping from the roof into the open air. This was spellbindingly strange, a contemporary version of both *The Odyssey* and *The Tempest*.

Emerge through the spume of mist to the **Canadian pavilion** opposite and you're in a white-out of ice, and a dramatised apology to the Inuit for forcing them out of their Igloolik territories. Featuring the great Danish actor Kim Bodnia, from *The Bridge* and *Killing Eve*, this film is a compelling recreation of historic events, but immensely too long at over an hour. The Biennale is not a cinema.

Iceland, by contrast, is on fire with a spectacular cave of glowing multicoloured threads descending like iridescent icicles. This pavilion is always something of a send-up, a charming play on Icelandic sagas. Some things never change in Venice.

Finland always rises above its allotted space, more of a shed than a pavilion, this time with a curious meadow of flora and fauna somehow blowing across its ceiling: a world turned upside down. **Russia** is always melodramatic, with a spectacular inferno of damned souls, sinister black automata rising and falling in scarlet hellfire.

There is never a queue for China, at the far end of the Arsenale docks, despite some extremely potent art (this year, ancient watercolours breaking into startling animation). There is always a queue for Britain.



Part of Cathy Wilkes's show for the British pavilion. Photograph: Luca Zanon/Awakening/Getty Images

One at a time is probably the best way to see Cathy Wilkes's melancholy show, in any case. Any more might overwhelm her tiny figures, with their white discs for heads and their distended grey bellies, children of poverty and hunger. A mother of sorts is evoked in the stark white arms that rise out of a basin, as if petrified in the constant act of washing up, and in the headless figure in a green 30s dress that stands upon feet of clay. Behind her lies another foot, perhaps the ghost of a lost child. There are faint red stains on the floor and a nameless bundle of rags. Some sort of narrative is building.

But the Belfast-born sculptor is nothing if not oblique. Lengths of tattered muslin invoke wedding veils and long-ago tea parties. Her frail figures seem to exist within a country house atmosphere of masters and servants, and the last room opens to numinous paintings and prints of what might be the Irish landscape. But it all feels wan and timid, for such a poet of an artist, rather than deliberately unfulfilled.

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By chance, **Sean Edwards**'s monologue for the Welsh pavilion seems to return to a similar past. Voiced by his mother, a lone parent scraping a living as a cleaner, you hear it broadcast among forests of carpet tracks and a hanging garden of quilts: a quiet and modest lament.

The grandest event of 2019, by general consent, is **Martin Puryear**'s American pavilion; its masterpiece stands outside. A gigantic open-wood carving, in the form of a radial sunburst, it stretches across the forecourt like the rood screen of a church. But emitting from its circular sun – or possibly trying to consume it – is a great serpentine tail, slithering away to the ground. The work is called *Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)*, ideal for Catholic, neoclassical Venice.

Inside, the 77-year-old sculptor has a gathering of past works, including his huge red Phrygian cap, revolutionary but also fragile, its vulnerable tip hanging low. Others carvings invoke Venetian fishermen's nets. Yet the assembly is oddly low key, nowhere near as powerful as his 2017 show for **London's Parasol Unit**.

India has a superb inaugural pavilion, containing some haunting cabinets of curiosities that replay its colonial past. **Ghana** is here for the first time too, with films by **John Akomfrah** and eerie painted portraits of fictional black people by **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**. New nations arrive – Madagascar, with a funereal deluge of black tissue paper – but also depart. Algeria and

Kazakhstan were both cancelled by their own governments at the last minute. Geopolitics is always in play here. If there was a prize for the worst pavilion – and the competition is not small – it would surely go to Austria’s garden of scarlet vagina-blossoms with shiny steel stamens. This is just crass. Far more disturbing – just as he likes it – is Christoph Büchel’s “intervention” in the Arsenale. The Swiss artist has worked with Venetian authorities to install the rusted wreck of the fishing boat that sank near the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2015, with the loss of more than 800 migrants, many of them trapped in the hold.



‘Appalling conjunction’: the arrival in Venice of Swiss artist Christoph Büchel’s Barca Nostra, his artwork using the fishing boat that sank off Lampedusa in 2015 with more than 800 migrants onboard. Photograph: Andrea Merola/EPA

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This devastating relic is positioned right next to a cafe, where art-worlders in Ferragamo trainers gossip without paying the slightest attention. Not even half a moment of silence. To walk

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past this appalling conjunction is to hang one's head in shame. How can it possibly be presented here, of all places, as a memorial, still less an exhibit?

The saving grace of the 2019 Biennale is the sheer sympathy with which **Ralph Rugoff**, director of London's Hayward Gallery, has curated the main international exhibition. Everything about it is human. Rugoff has reduced the number of artists, historically overwhelming, to around 80; half are women, for the first time; and equally unusual for this event, which often looks backwards, all are alive.

Here are tremendous images of Indian outsiders by night, spectral as ghosts in the rubble of Kolkata, by the photographer **Soham Gupta**. And **Gauri Gill**'s extraordinary pictures of Maharashtrian tribesmen wearing papier-mache masks based on their own sense of themselves as characters in a picaresque novel. Here is the black South African artist **Zanele Muholi** getting herself up as a black and white minstrel, or a tribeswoman with coils of sinister rope nooses for hair. And Christian Marclay's latest screen montage, *48 War Movies*, in which each spooling film blocks out part of the one beneath it in an infinite regression of violence.

The timings are perfect. Mordantly ironic paintings by George Condo, holograph phantasms of an angel, that the eye and mind can hardly grasp, newly made by the young Parisian **Cyprian Gaillard**. A terrifically counterintuitive film by the Los Angeles artist Arthur Jafa, collaging footage of black-on-white violence, and its opposite, with the testimony of a reformed white supremacist. Art can take you anywhere, any time – even into outer space with an exquisite memorial to Robert Henry Lawrence by the Bahamanian artist Tavares Strachan: just **pinpoints of light** in pitch blackness, describing a figure momentarily suspended as it falls to Earth, a radiant spaceman midway between drawing and sculpture. The death of the **first African American astronaut** is marked by a rising star of visionary art.

Five Venice show-stoppers



A visitor leaves Laure Prouvost's French pavilion, Venice 2019. Photograph: Tiziana Fabi/AFP/Getty Images

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French pavilion Enter through the ground, exit through a haze of vapour, swimming through a film of epic proportions in between: Laure Prouvost's wildly original homage to the sea, featuring glass oceans, operatic song and live performers is the high point of the 2019 Biennale.

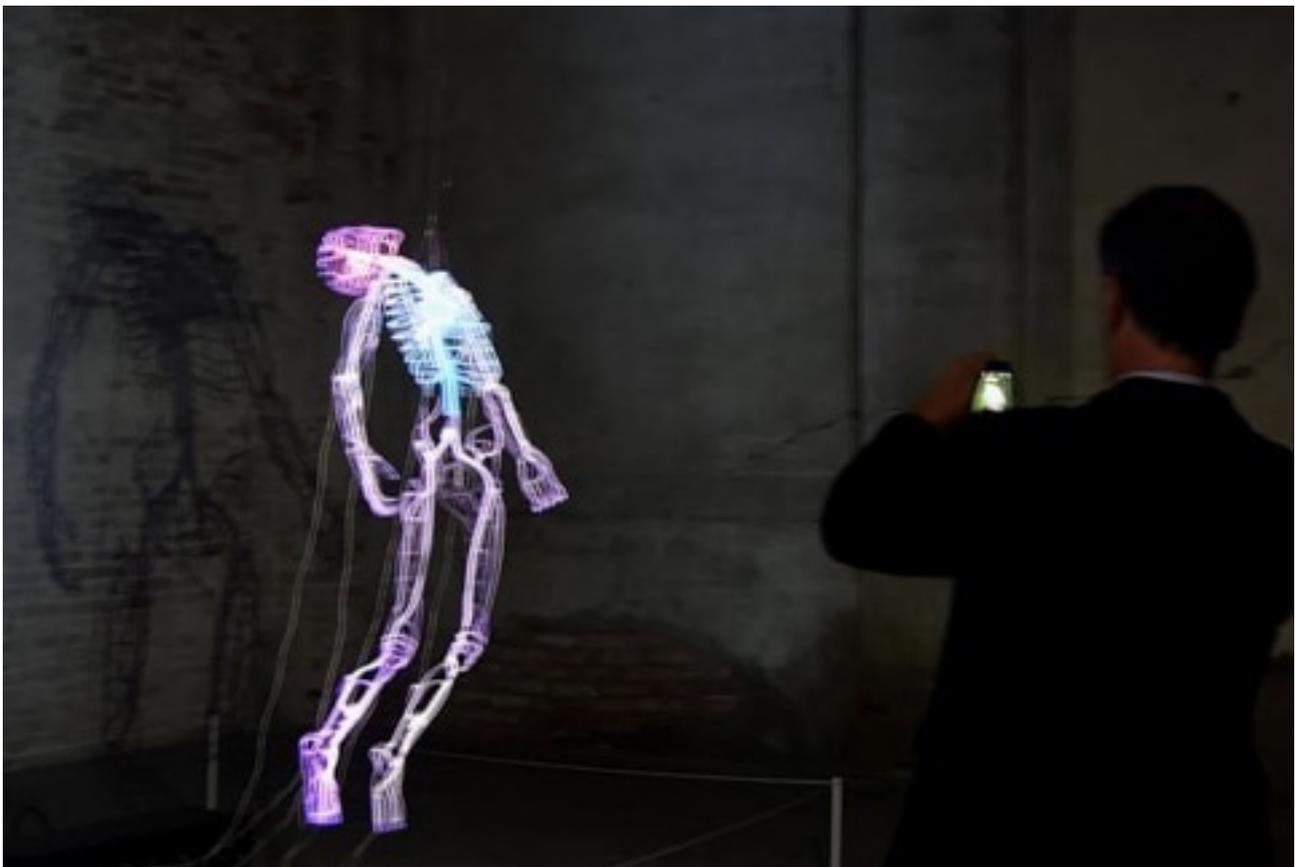
International pavilion Curated by Ralph Rugoff, the most cogent portrait of contemporary art in years, from the civil rights films of LA's Arthur Jafa to Frida Orupabo's double-take collages of black women, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's sinister surveillance films and a twinkling memorial to the first African American astronaut.

Ghana pavilion Ghana's first pavilion at Venice is extremely strong: featuring paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, films by

John Akomfrah, shimmering bottle-top hangings and tremendous black-and-white portraits from the 1960s by Felicia Abban, Ghana's first professional female photographer.

American pavilion The veteran US sculptor Martin Puryear dominates the Giardini with his monumental outdoor sculptures. Inside, his colossal wood sculptures take off from Brancusi and Arp to allude to Haitian slaves, civil war soldiers and the nets of Venetian fishermen.

Polish pavilion A private jet turned inside out, the cockpit disembowelled so that all its controls dangle outside, the seats swinging dangerously in space. Roman Stańczak's *Flight* is an antidote to the luxurious superyachts and plutocratic wealth of the Biennale.



'Visionary': Tavares Strachan's installation in the international pavilion. Photograph: Tiziana Fabi/ AFP/Getty Images

The Venice Biennale 2019 continues until 24 November