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Beyond the ‘Palace,’ an International Tour in One City

By HOLLAND COTTER JUNE 5, 2013



Venice Biennale Oliver Croy and Oliver Elser’s “387 Houses of Peter Fritz,” right, part of the main show, “The Encyclopedic Palace.” Credit Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

VENICE — Dark weather and high water were the backdrop to the start of the [55th Venice Biennale](#), an event that predictably combines enough cold cash and hot air to create a storm system of critical opinion. The main barometric indicator is always the big show that gives each Biennale its theme, and on this score, for the first time in years, there’s fairly smooth sailing.

The main show, “The Encyclopedic Palace” — organized by Massimiliano Gioni, 39, chief curator at the New Museum in Manhattan and this Biennale’s director — is a quiet success. Spread over two sites, in the park called the Giardini and the fortresslike Arsenale nearby, it’s immense, with more than 150 artists, but as tightly thought out as a small show — maybe too tightly to allow for wild-card surprises. Most shows on this scale are too messy; this one may be too neat. But it works.

Plus — a significant plus for anyone fed up to here with big-buck art — “Palace” doesn’t seem to have much interest in the mainstream market. It doesn’t say no to it, exactly. It just goes its own interesting way, not without problems.

And of course, the show is not the whole story. The Biennale is as much an archipelago of islands as Venice itself is.

Clustered around the main exhibition are dozens of national pavilions, each with an exhibition of its own, with more pavilions scattered around town in premises — churches and palazzi — more interesting than any on the Biennale grounds. Nearly 50 “collateral events,” semiofficially part of the Biennale, must be included in any comprehensive tour.

The total is overwhelming, but equipped with decent shoes and multiday vaporetto pass, I saw roughly 80 percent of this year’s sights on a trek that took me through most of city, always the Biennale’s real attraction.

Mr. Gioni titled his exhibition after a single piece of art, an 11-foot-high tower built by the self-taught artist Marino Auriti. Born in Italy in 1891, Auriti moved to the United States in the 1920s, settling in Kennett Square, Pa., where he ran an auto body shop while painting on the side.

After retiring in the 1950s, he began work on the tower, a stack of seven cylindrical layers surrounded by a colonnaded piazza, constructed of wood, glass and plastic (including hair combs). He conceived it as a model for a museum to be called the Encyclopedic Palace of the World, which would display the range of human achievement, “from the wheel to the satellite.”

He also made it a monument to ethical values, spelled out on the colonnade entablatures: “Live by your work,” “Make friends of your enemies,” “Watch that you don’t become greedy.” He wanted the museum to be erected on the Mall in Washington, took out a patent on it, even initiated a fund-raising campaign.

Mr. Gioni has placed Auriti’s dream tower up front in the Arsenale as a key to what follows: art that embodies utopian and dystopian visions; or attempts to encompass and categorize vast amounts of data; or is composed of many small and repeated parts.

Among works that qualify are paintings by the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, who claimed to receive her images from otherworldly beings. A video by the young French artist Camille Henrot jams the entire creation story into one short, percussively edited video. A set of 130 small clay sculptures made by the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss cover a period of 30 years.

Although Mr. Gioni includes several young artists on the rise — Ed Atkins, Helen Marten, Paloma Polo, James Richards, Shinichi Sawada — he also chooses some offbeat figures, like the nature photographer Eliot Porter, and brings in spiritual utilitarian objects like Tantric paintings and Roman Catholic ex-votos that were not created to be art in the conventional sense.

In combining these things, Mr. Gioni refers to the model of the “wunderkammer,” or cabinet of curiosities, collections of uncategorizable, often exotic objects first assembled in Renaissance Europe. This concept is not original, and it gets tricky when, as here, some curiosities are works by “outsider artists,” which can simply mean self-taught, but often implies having some form of physical, social or psychiatric disability.

The outsider art concept is tired by now, even ethically suspect, the equivalent of “primitive art” from decades ago. Mr. Gioni finesses the problem without really addressing it by integrating outsider-ish-looking inside art (there’s more and more of this around) so the two designations get blurred.

However you label them, it’s great to see in one place outsider pieces like the embroidery-encrusted vestments of the Brazilian Arthur Bispo do Rosario and the paper and twine

sculptures of the American James Castle together with out-of-the-mainstream art like the copper-wire paintings by Prabhavathi Meppayil from Bangalore, and the thickly collaged notebooks of the Japanese noise-rock musician Shinro Ohtake. That they're elbow to elbow with Bruce Nauman, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, Rosemarie Trockel and Jack Whitten is nice too.

Ms. Sherman is here as guest curator of a minishow embedded within Mr. Gioni's larger one, but so much in its spirit as to be indistinguishable as a separate entity. Ms. Trockel is represented by components from the exhibition "A Cosmos," from the New Museum.

She's an artist I admire, but I found that show surprisingly unsurprising.

With a blend of insider-outsider and art-nonart components, it could have been stimulating. But the objects had little to say to one another. I feel a lack of surprise in Mr. Gioni's show for the opposite reason: Its pairings — spiritualists paintings by af Klint and Emma Kunz, digital-printer abstractions by Alice Channer and Wade Guyton — are too neat and museumy.

Yet at the same time, the show's curatorial line is so firm, its choice of artists so strong and its pacing so expert that you are carried along, and ultimately rewarded. This is particularly true toward the conclusion of the Arsenale, with its purgatory of sculptures by Pawel Althamer, followed by Ryan Trecartin's video hell, followed by Walter De Maria's Minimalist heaven. It's a great end to a serious, standard-setting endeavor.

Once outside, you're in a world of hit and miss among the national pavilions, which tend to be high in polish, low in impact. Some of the best extend the accumulative density of Mr. Gioni's show. This is true of Sarah Sze's assemblages of countless tiny found things in the United States pavilion, and of archival photographic installations by Petra Feriancova at the pavilion of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

There are persuasive alternatives to material density. In the otherwise empty Romania pavilion, Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmus have directed performers in stylized enactments of art from Biennales past. The work owes much to the example of Tino Sehgal, but it has its own charms. (Mr. Sehgal, who is in Mr. Gioni's show, received the Gold Lion award for best artist this year.)

Three young artists, Ei Arakawa, Gela Patashuri and Sergei Tcherepnin, make similarly interactive use the Georgia pavilion, a temporary, raised, loftlike enclosure at the edge the Arsenale for more sporadic performances. And Alfredo Jaar's show at the Chile pavilion is centered around a sculpture that moves, an exact model of the Giardini campus that emerges from and sinks back into a vat of fetid-looking water.

Mr. Jaar is telling a story about the alignment of art and power: Many of the older, pre-World War II pavilions are relics of a murderous nationalism were built as cultural trophies by economically competitive nations that created colonial empires and eventually led Europe into war.

This show is filled with narratives. Everything seems to have a back story, many of them politically inflected. Tavares Strachan's entrancing installation at the Bahamas pavilion tells of exploration and who really got where first.

At the Lebanon pavilion, a film by Akram Zaatari fleshes out a real-life account of an Israeli Air Force fighter who, in 1982, was sent to destroy a building in a Lebanese town, recognized the place as a school and dropped his bombs into the sea. And in a church converted into an exhibition space, a group of dioramas installed in a church dramatize, in exacting detail, the ordeal that artist Ai Weiwei underwent in police custody in China.

This notable display, technically a collateral event, is not far from the Arsenale but hard to find. Others are long walks or boat rides away, but worth tracking down. An Iraq pavilion is an informal affair up the Grand Canal. You're invited to relax, read up on Iraq, have tea. And the artists, based in Babylon, Basra and Baghdad, are terrific, from Abdul Raheem Yassir, who has been producing mordant political cartoons since 1970, to the two-man collective called WAMI (Hashin Taeeh and Yaseen Wami), which produces ingenious furniture from cardboard boxes.

Without biennales we would probably never see shows of such art, made under truly challenging conditions. And without such shows, we would never see so many of Venice's varied interiors, from sports arenas (the Cyprus and Lithuania pavilions), to commercial galleries (the Kosovo pavilion), to the National Archaeological Museum, where work by the Cuban-American artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons sits amid Roman sculptures.

Every now and then, a visit gives a shock.

When I climbed the stairs of an old building to the Angola pavilion, I couldn't believe my eyes. Gorgeous photographs by Edson Chagas, from the city of Luanda, were there, in neat stacks of giveaway prints. And the walls around them were lined with Renaissance paintings: Sassetta, Bernardo Daddi, Botticelli and Piero di Cosimo. I and Angola were in the Palazzo Cini, a private museum that, except during the Biennale, keeps eccentric hours.

Mr. Chagas worked perfectly into the setting. (The pavilion, with his installation, was later awarded best of show.)

He and the young curators, Paula Nascimento and Stefano Rabolli Pansera, had keyed colors in the photographs to the paintings: a stack of prints of a blue-painted Luanda door stood in front of a blue-robed Botticelli Virgin. Neither blue was more beautiful than the other, but the African blue was soaked in sunlight. And I could take it away. It made my Venice stay.

Correction: June 7, 2013

Because of an editing error, a [picture caption](#) on Thursday with an art review of the Venice Biennale misstated part of the name of the main show in some editions. As the review correctly noted, it is "The Encyclopedic Palace," not "The Encyclopedia Palace." In addition, the review misstated the surname of an artist whose work sits amid Roman sculptures at the National Archaeological Museum and referred incompletely to her. She is María Magdalena Campos-Pons, not Camos-Pons, and while she was born in Cuba, she is an American citizen and lives in Massachusetts.

The 55th Venice Biennale continues at various locations through Nov. 24; labiennale.org/en/biennale.

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