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That Unruly, Serendipitous Show in Venice

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN JUNE 15, 2007

VENICE, June 13 — After the artists, dealers, critics and hedge-fund guys jetted off last weekend to shop in Basel and check out Documenta in Germany, it became easier to tell whether the 52nd version of the Venice Biennale was as much of a bore as it seemed.

It's not. It's subtle and sober. And, well, yes, maybe it's just a little boring.

But it grows on you. It did on me, anyway. Aside, of course, from the simple fact that it's in this ancient paradise of sun, honeysuckle and stone (passing disappointments of art somehow invariably wafting away on sea breezes), what's always glorious about this oldest of the international festivals is its unruliness. There is never just one biennale but many of them, all mixed up, and you're free to like or kvetch about any or all.

A commissioner — this time the former Museum of Modern Art curator, Robert Storr — deals with the crazy bureaucracy and is responsible for the main exhibition. As in the past that show divides itself between the Italian pavilion in the Giardini Pubblici, the biennale's traditional base, and the Arsenale, the former rope factory nearby, whose traversal, even when everything is as compulsively well ordered as it is now, feels like a forced march.

But then there are dozens of countries, more and more each biennale (76 now, a record), which organize their own pavilions all over town. By chance, overlaps occur between a pavilion and the main show, implying actual coordination. Mr. Storr has included a work by Sophie Calle (a simple, heartbreaking memorial to her mother). Ms. Calle also takes over the large French pavilion with a virtual library of women's reactions to an anonymous break-up letter she ostensibly received. Maybe you have to be a woman to fully grasp its virtues, which many people did, but not me.

Mr. Storr has also picked two works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the Cuban-born American who (posthumously) represents the United States. His pavilion, put together by Nancy Spector of the Guggenheim, is the biennale's most elegant by far. Gifted beyond reason at turning hard-nosed Minimalism into humble, humane art, Mr. Gonzalez-Torres (1957-96) gets the tribute he deserves. I returned a few times to a sepulchral white room in the pavilion where a rectangular carpet of licorice candies (you may take one if you wish) evokes a gravesite beneath a rectangle of scrimmed skylight. My heart leapt.

I also finally made it into the German pavilion, having skipped the daunting lines over the weekend, and saw Isa Genzken's appalling mélange of mirrors, astronaut costumes, nooses and suitcases (something to do with "petrodollars," she has said, as if that's an explanation). Then I checked in a second time on Tracey Emin's tortured, itchy, nude self-portrait etchings and drawings in the British pavilion; they looked as wan and second-hand as they had the first time. Warmed over Egon Schieles, they left an impression that Ms. Emin has her sights on the art market while also suggesting that even the cheekiest British artists are really reactionaries at heart.

The Korean pavilion was a nice surprise. A young, Yale-trained artist named Hyungkoo Lee, has fabricated the presumptive fossil remains of Bugs Bunny, Tom and Jerry, and others, somberly presented in glass vitrines as if at a natural history museum; there's also an installation having to do with devices to enhance the artist's physique and a surgical theater

full of applicable instrumentation, conjuring Matthew Barney. A pair of 8-year-olds accompanying me found this quite fascinating, as they did David Altmejd's contribution on behalf of Canada: a house of mirrors with stuffed squirrels, hair, berries, mushrooms, werewolves and other harum-scarum concoctions typical of the artist. He gets my prize for the most industrious, if not the most profound, pavilion.

A near second on that score, across the gardens, is Monika Sosnowska, who has somehow shoehorned the huge twisted armature of a hypothetical building into Poland's pavilion, recalling coups of unlikely architecture by Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson. Cogitating on bygone utopias and Communism's fall, the work impresses mostly as a logistical feat and as one of the few large-scale sculptural gambits at the biennale.

The funniest entry belongs to Jaime Vallare and Rafael Lamata, calling themselves Los Torreznos, in the Spanish pavilion. Seated side by side against a white backdrop in several videos, they gesticulate and shout back and forth names and phrases of political figures in rhythmic, comedic crescendo: "Marx!" "Maaa!" Marx!" Maaaaaoooo!" "Hitler!" "Maaaaaoooo!" "Kropotkin!!!!" It is funnier than it sounds.

Mr. Storr's show is not funny. In the Arsenale he presents various photographs documenting far-flung global crises. These blessedly eschew the usual art world hectoring and two-bit posturing, providing instead, as Mr. Storr put it, "something to think about other than the art world." Thank goodness for that.

In the Italian pavilion he stresses estimable seniors, catering not to jaded insiders but to a broader public for whom the sight of new or nearly new paintings by Gerhard Richter, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Ryman and Sigmar Polke (huge translucent tours-de-force of darkling mystery, the color of molasses or crude oil) does not provoke the rolling of eyes.

I confess to some eye rolling. Mr. Storr's choices seemed risk-averse.

But then, I saw the sense of them. Mr. Storr has spent his career

endorsing these artists and others in the Italian pavilion — Susan Rothenberg, Sol LeWitt (a spectacular pair of spidery wall drawings, one light, one dark), Elizabeth Murray, Louise Bourgeois and Bruce Nauman (a fountain, made with molded plastic heads turned inside out and industrial sinks). It would have been strange, not to mention disingenuous, had he ignored them to anticipate the insider response, especially considering that his job was to put on view the art he deems most worth looking at.

In lieu of the usual bazaar, with hundreds of artists in no logical order (not many biennales ago, the bewildering total topped 350), Mr. Storr limits his choice to 96. An argument, based on serendipity, can be made for more chaos. But less scrupulously, chaos panders to commerce, making the biennale resemble an art fair. This show declines to emulate that model and also skips the navel-gazing and institutional critique that art festivals favor, stressing instead good old patient observation.

The more I looked, the more turned up. Adel Abdessemed's circles made of barbed wire, tucked into a corner and easily missed, gave a twist to Minimalism. They were nearly hidden behind El Anatsui's great chain-mail tapestries, made of metal bottle caps and whiskey bottle collars, richly colored, providing a rare dose of sheer eye candy.

Tomoko Yoneda's photographs, on inspection, revealed themselves to be views of a minefield in the demilitarized zone in South Korea, a sniper's post in Beirut and of Israel from a Hezbollah-controlled village in Lebanon. They snuck up on me. Ms. Calle's memorial to her mother came to mind before a suite of videos in the Arsenale by a Chinese artist, Yang Zhenzhong, who asked strangers on the street and elsewhere to say "I will die." A Japanese schoolgirl giggled the words. An elderly swimmer on the beach added, "But not yet." A gruff young man spoke the phrase, then glared at the camera, which panned out to reveal a policeman's badge on his chest.

There were links and themes. A Colombian artist, Óscar Muñoz, on five adjacent screens, is showing various faces drawn in watercolor, outdoors,

on stone. The faces evaporate in the heat, suggesting the disappeared in South America. It's deeply moving, and it dovetailed with another remarkable work, by an American artist, Emily Prince, who makes palm-size drawings of all the American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This is quiet art. Much of this biennale murmurs, it doesn't shout. The art world these days often bellows and struts. I doubt this biennale will be recalled as groundbreaking or dynamic, but it is an independent show, strong in its convictions. A series of photographs of bombed-out buildings in Beirut by Gabriele Basilico, an Italian artist, hang near a cut-and-dry informational display by Yto Barrada, a French artist, about how indigenous flowers in Tangier have been overrun by commercial development. They're works about civic demise, one linked to war, the other to prosperity.

There's a large brick model of a favela, put together by a group of Brazilian children called the Morrinho Project, which insinuates itself (meaningfully) outside the United States pavilion. It has become a playground for children visiting the biennale, who clamber over it and play with toy cars. The favela reappears at the Arsenale in the work of Paula Trope, a Brazilian artist, who photographed the children of the Morrinho Project. The combination is a nice touch by Mr. Storr.

I shouldn't fail to mention another Brazilian he includes, Waltércio Caldas. Mr. Caldas has arranged glass panes, metal brackets, dangling colored strings, rocks and painted black rectangles, all placed just so, in a room of the Italian pavilion. The work pays implicit homage to postwar compatriots like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Everything is still, except the strings, which move slightly when people pass. I don't think it's coincidental that Mr. Storr has included elsewhere sculptures by Fred Sandback, the American master of ethereal string geometries, a gentle genius, who died in 2003. Better late than never to honor him too.

Let me not forget a Japanese artist called Tabaimo, who has concocted an animation of a dollhouse, furnished by disembodied hands that

frantically scratch away at each other and then at the rooms, revealing a kind of pulsing body underneath, before a flood comes and causes the cycle to begin again. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have returned to form with an elaborate installation called “Manas,” of a supposed utopian city in northern Tibet, replete with intricate models of mountain observatories where inhabitants receive cosmic energy and commune with extraterrestrials. On certain days, so the Kabakovs explain, an identical city could be seen hovering in the sky, a heavenly Manas that the earthly one mirrors.

That’s not a bad metaphor for the biennale. A video called “Shadow Boxing” by Sophie Whettnall shows a woman standing motionless while a boxer dances and jabs around her, his fist coming just millimeters from her face. The camera pans in. We see her hair move with the breeze of passing blows. Her expression remains impassive. She pretends to ignore the violence.

But her eyes dilate. It’s impossible to remain impervious to what’s going on around her, no matter how she tries to seem otherwise.

Come to think of it, maybe that’s the right metaphor for the state of art now.

The Venice Biennale, “Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind: Art in the Present Tense,” continues through Nov. 21; www.labiennale.org.

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