

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

A Class Trip to the 60th International Art Exhibition, 20.04–24.11.2024

Like all respectable art historians (in training) with an interest in contemporary art, the students of the Art History specialization at Babeş-Bolyai University joined the artworld pilgrimage that transforms the already beyond picturesque Venice into a lagoon-wide venue for contemporary art. I will never stop suggesting this trip, not because of the Biennale shows' intrinsic value, because it can be hit or miss, but for the experience itself. Besides from the Serenissima, which rarely leaves someone unimpressed, the Biennale is simply a great opportunity to see contemporary art from the highly experimental to the deeply legitimized, from overly simplistic to profoundly conceptual, from sloppy to polished, presented both within white cube settings and in dialogue with Baroque churches, palaces, and other historic sites. This diversity extends not only to the artworks themselves but also to the wide range of curatorial approaches they reflect. This is the greatest advantage and disadvantage of this trip – it is an overdose, often of varying quality, of our drug of choice – art.

On my behalf, the 60th edition was pretty lacklustre overall, and even the major collateral shows, like Julie Mehretu's *Ensemble* at Palazzo Grassi, failed to pack a punch. The theme of foreigners often seemed to be translated as a strained relationship with institutions, demonstrated by the large number of works in mediums belonging more to the applied arts, as well as the obvious outsider art inspiration present at every step. This could be seen in national pavilions such as the Serbian one, or even the Romanian one to some extent, and in the wonderfully organic pavilion of Saudi Arabia, where it also took feminist overtones.

The more obvious reading of foreignness, a political and cultural hot topic currently, is that of immigration – this was present in the sensible Austrian pavilion and in two of the highlights of the Arsenale central pavilion: Bouchra Khalili's *The Mapping Journey Project* and WangShui's installation work across varying mediums. These works encapsulate what the Biennale sometimes is about



and what contemporary art *can* be about – from sociological methods connected to personal and group mythologies, the migration patterns, like an Odyssean trip (Khalili), to liminality, but one where each material and technical choice is steeped in symbolism (WangShui). That or just plainly weird experiences like this edition's Italian pavilion...

This being said, all the students' choices are their own, which is an interesting experiment in its own right, because no two sets of eyes can look at this overwhelming array of art and curatorial practices and lock on to the same thing.

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Aleksandar Denić: *Exposition Coloniale*, Serbian Pavilion, Curator Ksenija Samadržija



Exposition Coloniale in the Serbian Pavilion took full advantage of Aleksandar Denić's (b. 1963) background as a stage designer as the space was divided into several rooms and constructions, which invited us to meditate on the consequences of colonialism, that are not confined only to the sphere of politics and finance, but are also

found in human values and principles. What caught my attention in the first place was the familiarity of the space, which is quite specific to the Balkan area. The objects and decor had a connection to the not-so-distant past; each had a symbolism that urged the viewer to examine the current power structures, consumerism, and the state of affairs in a post-communist European country that is not in the European Union.

The structures in the rooms were quite crowded and could give the feeling of being overwhelmed, potentially causing a state of social anxiety, especially if there were many people around. Nonetheless, the space embodied one of the characteristics that I consider quite important in understanding contemporary art, which is establishing a connection with visitors. The artist

used his experience in theater, creating a real setting for a play whose main actors are the visitors. I came to this conclusion after capturing a rather funny scene. Two young people positioned themselves on either side of a shop window that was part of the decor of a convenience store, posing for a photo in which they pretended to be the seller and the buyer. Everyone around them had fun, and this episode certainly remained in their memory and made them see the exhibition and the theme of the Biennale in a different, more personal manner. We were all foreigners, watching an all-too-familiar and ordinary scene—the small talk prerequisite of a transaction, a longstanding genre scene in art history, now immersive (the impeccable craftsmanship of the set helped in sustaining the illusion) and Balkanised, transforming a Venetian exhibition space into a stage and visitors into actors.

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Inuuteq Storch: *Rise of the Sunken Sun*, Danish Pavilion, Curator Louise Wolthers



At the 2024 Venice Biennale, Denmark's pavilion perfectly captured the general theme of 'Foreigners Everywhere.' Artist and photographer Inuuteq Storch (b. 1989), through *Rise of the Sunken Sun*, exhibits some photographs from his life and also his journey to Greenland. Why Greenland? Because this territory, although autonomous, is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, which offers the citizens of *Kalaallit Nunaat*

(the Greenlandic translation) full Danish citizenship. The central idea, revolving around everyday life, the happy and spontaneous moments that he has experienced over the years, were easy to follow in his photographs; but more importantly he also conveyed the idea that although we can be strangers to each other, something or someone can bring us together in a natural way.

Although he travels and photographs different places like Nuuk, Qaanaaq or Sisimiut, the visitor is overcome by a unitary and deep sense of spiritual connection with nature and the artist's ancestors. Storch's photographs are deeply personal, creating a connection between the viewer, his own story, and those of his subjects. At the same time, he seeks to highlight the visual image as a historical document, striving to revive and transmit the culture of a people—and to honor those who sustain it.

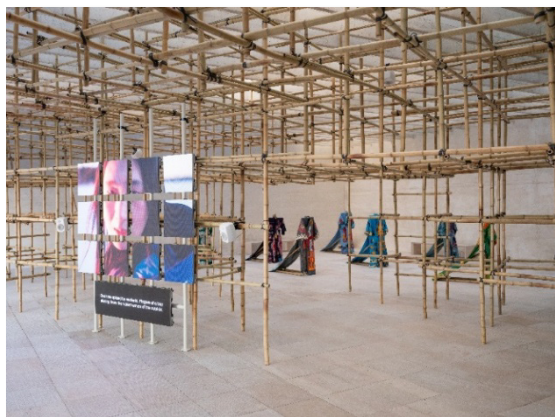
Looking at the artist's works, the feeling of tranquillity and peace gripped you more and more, creating a nostalgic and not at all disturbing atmosphere.

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Lap-See Lam, Tze Yeung Ho, and Kholod Hawash: *The Altersea Opera*, Pavilion of Nordic Countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway), Curator Asrin Haidari



Three artists were directed by curator Asrin Haidari in creating the audio-visual-textile installation for the Nordic Countries Pavilion at this year's Biennale: Swedish artist Lap-See Lam (b. 1990) conceived the project and led the collaboration with the Norwegian experimental composer Tze Yeung Ho (b. 1992), and the Iraqi-born Finnish textile artist Kholod Hawash (b. 1977). The pavilion

offered an experience that envelops visitors in the dramatic story of a sea voyage, which has as its main character the Cantonese mythological figure Lo-Ting—half fish, half man.

I found the pavilion fascinating as it managed, through music and the combination of technology and traditional techniques, to integrate the viewer into the story that speaks poetically about the problems of uprooting, displacement,

belonging, and identity. Approaching these themes through the prism of the fantastic and folklore offers a refreshing perspective on the theme of ‘Foreigners Everywhere’.

Visually, the textile works are delightful splashes of color in a neutral space, filled with dramatic music. The style employed by Kholod Hawash illustrates the scenes and characters through embroidery and different types of stitches in a bright way, giving a special breath of life to this pavilion. Exploring this installation—between craftsmanship and concept—was definitely a highlight of my trip to Venice.

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Wong Weng Cheong: *Above Zobeido*, Curator Chang Chan



Above Zobeide was a collateral event of the 60th International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia*, inside the Istituto “Santa Maria della Pietà”. The exhibition, curated by Chang Chan and presenting the artworks of the artist Wong Weng Cheong (b. 1994), was inspired by Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible Cities*, more precisely, by the fictional city of Zobeide. The

artist combined immersive installations and digital prints to construct a post-apocalyptic dystopia divided into two rooms.

The first room introduces the public to the dystopic world of the artist. In a peaceful, quiet atmosphere, the viewer can observe mutated herbivorous creatures of different sizes, their elongated bodies wandering among desolate ruins. Although the scene appears to be the aftermath of a catastrophe, the tower placed in the middle of the space, together with the surveillance cameras plastered all over the room, give the impression that those animals are not

alone. They are observed from afar. Thus, by entering this space, from a simple observer, the viewer becomes the one being watched along with the other animals. The ruins, the weird, mutated creatures, and the surveillance cameras, in the dim light sources and eerie silence, create an uneasy feeling, a surreal sense of oppression, and even apocalyptic anxieties.

In the second room, the viewer could see several screens that transmitted with a slight delay everything that was happening in the main space. Thus, you could observe your reactions for a short time. The televisions, arranged in two rows, emitted a tangle of cables that—along with the limited viewing time—intensified feelings of restlessness, anxiety, and self-awareness. The contrast between the two rooms, coupled with the artist's meticulous attention to detail, allowed visitors to engage deeply with the themes of the work, leaving a lasting impression.

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