

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

***Foreigners Everywhere:* Mural Art is No Longer a Stranger. The Integration of Mural Art into the 2024 Venice Biennale**

The Venice Biennale 2024 marks a significant moment in the ongoing redefinition of mural art within the framework of contemporary artistic discourse. Historically associated with political activism, social resistance, and alternative visual cultures, muralism has often occupied a liminal space between institutional recognition and underground artistic practice. However, its presence at this year's Biennale signals a paradigm shift, wherein an art form rooted in public, often unauthorized, interventions is now legitimized within one of the most prestigious platforms of global contemporary art.

This transition is not merely a matter of visibility but could reflect a broader reconfiguration of power structures in the art world. The incorporation of large-scale mural works—such as MAHKU's mythological retelling of migration, Aravani Art Project's exploration of gender identity through color symbolism, and Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's fusion of indigenous embroidery, queerness, and automotive iconography—underscores the capacity of muralism to articulate socio-political narratives that extend beyond the constraints of traditional gallery spaces. These interventions challenge the Eurocentric, object-based model of art consumption by emphasizing ephemerality, site-specificity, and collective authorship, thereby questioning the conventions of artistic value, permanence, and ownership.

At the same time, the Biennale's embrace of muralism raises critical questions: Does the institutionalization of an art form born from countercultural movements alter its radical potential? To what extent does the relocation of mural art from the street to the white cube or, in this case, the walls of the Biennale's pavilions, transform its function as a vehicle for dissent and community engagement? These tensions lie at the heart of this year's mural interventions, positioning them not merely as aesthetic contributions but as active negotiations of power, space, and voice in contemporary art.



The mural intervention by MAHKU on the façade of the Central Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024 aligns with a tradition of muralism as a space for contestation and historical re-narration, challenging the Western artistic canon while asserting indigenous knowledge systems. By transposing the *kapewë pukeni* (the alligator bridge) myth into a large-scale, dynamic visual register, the work not only reclaims a Huni Kuin cosmology within an institutionalized art context but also interrogates the relationship between migration, spatiality, and cultural memory.



MAHKU, *Kapewë Pukeni*, Venice Biennale 2024, Central Pavilion, Giardini.
A visual narrative of Huni Kuin identity and migration.

Historically, muralism has served as a tool of identity assertion and political resistance, from Renaissance frescoes articulating theological and social hierarchies to post-revolutionary Mexican muralism and contemporary Street Art as a form of urban activism. In this tradition, MAHKU's work reconfigures the Neoclassical façade of Giardini's Central Pavilion, transforming it into a medium for a non-Western lexicon. The juxtaposition suggests that Greco-Roman mythology, the foundation of all classical art, is being superseded, perhaps awkwardly, by a myth largely unfamiliar, and consequently uncomfortable to the European culture. Its fragmented spatial composition, where time, space, and identity are fluid, still marks it as 'exotic'.

In this context, MAHKU's intervention raises a fundamental question for contemporary art history: to what extent does the integration of indigenous visual discourses into global art institutions genuinely reshape dominant paradigms, and to what extent does it risk neutralizing them through aestheticization? By its very presence at the Biennale, MAHKU's muralism is not merely an artistic gesture but also a form of visibility claim and a negotiation of the place of indigenous art within the international art landscape.

If MAHKU's intervention speaks to the politics of migration and ancestral knowledge, Aravani Art Project's *Diaspore* engages with themes of gender dysphoria, belonging, and the reconfiguration of identity. Spanning 100 feet along the Arsenale, this mural—the collective's first appearance at the Biennale—merges personal narratives with broader socio-political commentaries on trans visibility, acceptance, and resistance.



Aravani Art Project, *Diaspore*, Venice Biennale 2024, Arsenale.
Celebrating transgender identities through vibrant mural art.

At its core, *Diaspore* explores the concept of “foreignness,” not in a geopolitical sense but as an existential condition tied to gender dysphoria—the feeling of being exiled from one’s own body. By further framing trans experience through the lens of diaspora, the mural aligns gender transition with broader narratives of migration, adaptation, and cultural negotiation. In doing so, it challenges binary understandings of belonging and instead proposes a more fluid, evolving model of identity.

This theme is reinforced through the composition itself. Each trans woman depicted within the mural represents a different stage in the journey toward self-acceptance. Shanthi Muniswamy, painted in pale yellow and surrounded by pink flowers, is shown in a moment of transformation, symbolizing growth and

self-discovery. Jyoti H. Tirakanagowda holds a birdcage from which a geometric bird escapes, a potent metaphor for liberation from societal constraints and the anxieties surrounding transition. Karnika Bai, dressed in a striking sari, embodies confidence and self-assurance, standing as a beacon of pride for the queer community. Purushii, in deep blue, is depicted in a contemplative pose, reflecting on her personal evolution. Kanchana, from Aravani's Chennai team, is shown at peace within a garden of flowers, symbolizing harmony and integration.

For Aravani Art Project, colour is more than just an aesthetic choice, it is a political statement. Bright, saturated pigments evoke Indian visual traditions, referencing textiles, festivals, and architectural ornamentation, while also serving as a direct visual link to LGBTQ+ and trans activism. The blue and red rectangles within the mural symbolize the collective's core team, while the floral patterns represent the members who could not be present in Venice, further emphasizing the communal nature of their work.

The interplay between traditional Indian aesthetics and queer symbolism is crucial to the collective's approach. Their use of vivid, almost hallucinatory hues challenges the Eurocentric gaze that often frames trans narratives within discourses of suffering and marginalization. Instead, Aravani Art Project centres joy, celebration, and resilience, reclaiming the right to public space and self-representation.

The act of painting murals has always been inherently political, particularly for communities that have been historically excluded from mainstream art institutions. In the case of Aravani Art Project, muralism serves a dual function: it is both an assertion of presence and a tool for social change. By creating large-scale, public artworks, the collective disrupts the invisibility imposed upon trans bodies, making their existence not just seen but monumental.

At the Biennale, where the dominant art historical canon still largely prioritizes Western, cisgender, and male perspectives, the placement of *Diaspore* within the Arsenale is itself a radical gesture. It signals a shift in the way institutional spaces engage with trans narratives, not as peripheral concerns but as integral to contemporary artistic discourse. The mural's vibrant depiction of trans identities, intertwined with themes of displacement and belonging, reclaims public space as a site of affirmation and visibility. By doing so, it aligns with the broader curatorial framework of the Biennale, which foregrounds marginalized perspectives as central to the evolution of contemporary art.

Expanding on this discourse, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness* extends the challenge to dominant narratives by reconfiguring historically masculinized imagery into a vision of queer futurism and ecological harmony. Her modular paintings and installations merge the mechanical and the organic, incorporating embroidery traditions, mural aesthetics,

and religious iconography to construct a counter-narrative to colonial and patriarchal histories. The work's focus on automobiles, perceived by the artist as inherently feminine, subverts the aggressive masculinity typically associated with industrial design hailed by the machist Futurists, envisioning a speculative utopia where technology and nature coexist in fluid symbiosis. Together, these works aim towards redefining the politics of representation, positioning queer and trans identities not as exceptions within art history, but as active agents in reshaping its trajectory.



Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness*, Venice Biennale 2024, Arsenale.

Positioned near the entrance of the Biennale's exhibition spaces, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness* spans over 15 meters, its structure evoking a pre-Columbian ziggurat that rises in layers of intersecting canvases. Toranzo Jaeger creates a visual dialogue between automotive forms: exhaust pipes spewing crimson smoke, dynamic swirling lines, and intimate, lush landscapes, such as an erotic gathering of queer women enveloped in lush foliage. Indigenous Mexican embroidery techniques appear throughout, reinforcing the work's engagement with cultural continuity and resistance. The compositional density of her paintings recalls

the legacy of Mexican muralism, particularly Diego Rivera and Juan O’Gorman, yet her intervention is distinctly personal and radical, reclaiming historical visual languages for a contemporary, queer feminist perspective.

Her work also engages explicitly with political discourse, integrating references to Palestinian resistance within the broader framework of anti-colonial struggle. By reinterpreting Frida Kahlo’s *Viva la Vida, Watermelons* (1954), replacing its inscription with *Viva Palestina*, and stitching a heart from *The Two Fridas* (1939) alongside the phrase “Hearts that unite against genocide” Toranzo Jaeger foregrounds solidarity as an intrinsic part of her practice. These elements resonate throughout the Biennale’s thematic framework, addressing displacement, marginalization, and the fluidity of identity.

Together, these works exemplify the Biennale’s evolving engagement with narratives that have long been marginalized within institutional spaces. *Diaspore*, *Rage Is a Machine in Times of Senselessness*, and MAHKU’s monumental mural do more than assert visibility; they actively dismantle the hierarchies of power embedded in artistic traditions. While *Diaspore* reclaims public space through trans narratives and vibrant, identity-affirming imagery, and Toranzo Jaeger’s work subverts the hypermasculinity of industrial design, MAHKU’s mural bridges myth and geography, transforming Indigenous oral histories into visual cartographies of displacement and resilience. Each of these projects engages with a history of exclusion—whether through gender, colonialism, or Western art canons—yet they do not merely critique; they construct alternative frameworks for understanding contemporary artistic discourse. By reimagining public space, historical iconography, and technological symbolism through queer, trans, and Indigenous lenses, these works propose radical new possibilities for art as a way of resistance, transformation, and collective imagination.

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