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Venice Biennale 2022

# Cyborgs, sirens and a singing murderer: the thrilling, oligarch-free Venice Biennale – review

The Russian pavilion is closed and you can't speak in the Italian one. Thank goodness for the opium-smoking cat and the human turning into a mobile phone. Our writer reports from the groundbreaking arts spectacular

[David Levene's gallery of the Venice Biennale](#)

★★★★☆



Monumental ... Brick House (2019) by Simone Leigh, part of The Milk of Dreams at Venice Biennale. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

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**W**onders and marvels, the beautiful and the terrible, the celebratory and the morbid all fill the 59th Venice Biennale. Business as usual, you might say, but there are no trillionaire oligarch yachts moored by the Giardini and there is less razzmatazz all round. As well as being the first biennale since the pandemic,

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this is the first time the main exhibition has been predominantly devoted to women, trans and non-binary artists. It is also the first time that a black British artist, Sonia Boyce, has won the Golden Lion for best national pavilion.

We wander about, wearing masks and carrying tote bags. The Russian pavilion is closed (the curators resigned) and Ukraine has a large presence both off-site and in the dusty spaces between the national pavilions. In the wake of Black Lives Matter, Covid and escalating existential dread, this biennale was bound to be different. You are asked to remain silent as you traipse through the Italian pavilion, which seems like a parody of a Mike Nelson installation. I heard the sound of frantic drilling emanating from behind the doors of the Chinese pavilion. You can't read the white texts painted on to the white walls of the empty and partially excavated German pavilion. And if you don't use the torch on your phone, you won't see a thing in the Swiss pavilion, which presents itself as a concert for which there is currently no music. (The darkened space, populated by shadowy wooden heads, hands and other body parts, smells of charred wood - make of that what you will.)

### **▲▲ One critic told me he felt excluded amid all the women, non-binary and trans artists. I barely noticed**

In curator Cecilia Alemani's *The Milk of Dreams*, located towards the end of the Arsenale, a man sits on the edge of a bed in Diego Marcon's film *The Parent's Room*. A woman lies under the sheets beside him. A blackbird swoops on to the windowsill and sings, snow falls and the man sings too. He has murdered his wife, he tells us in verse, as well as his daughter and son. Dead or alive, the actors all wear prosthetic masks cast from their own faces. They appear not quite alive, not entirely dead, either. The bird chirrup and the man sings sweetly of his crime, which culminates in his own suicide. What a strange, chilly little vignette this is; a cautionary tale; a revelling in melancholy and unaccountable murder on a winter's day. That's men for you, in their self-centred way.



📷 Untitled (Beginning/ Middle/ End) by Barbara Kruger. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Marcon is one of only a handful of men in Alemani's complex and fascinating show. The biennale's main exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams* otherwise includes only female, non-binary and trans artists. One critic complained to me that he felt excluded. I barely noticed. Anyone needing a testosterone fix can head to other shows outside the biennale proper, which include large-scale representations of famous men including Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz. As it is, cis-gendered white men have dominated the biennale for over a century.

Gender alone does not drive *The Milk of Dreams*, whose title is borrowed from British surrealist [Leonora Carrington](#), who imagined a world set free, where people transform themselves into someone or something else and identity becomes mutable. The imagination is the engine of change at a time when our place in the world - and indeed the world itself - feel ever more precarious.

Carrington's paintings occupy one of various thematic displays or time capsules within the exhibition by the New York-based Italian curator Alemani. These reflective pauses give *The Milk of Dreams* thematic and historical depth, punctuating what can too often feel like a procession of one damn thing after another. Along the way, we encounter mannequins and automata, puppets and masks, silent footage of Josephine Baker dancing at the Folies Bergère. In a section focusing on spiritualism, we find ectoplasm and concrete poetry, drawings that channel unseen forces and messages from the beyond.



Counterblaste by Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, in the international pavilion. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

And then there are the jolts. Danish artist Louis Marcussen - who changed her name to Ovaracti, meaning Chief Lunatic - was assigned male at birth and attempted to change sex through self-surgery before being reassigned as a woman. Ovaracti's elongated cutout figures, carved mannequins and paintings of cat-like figures (one smoking an opium pipe) are frightening, powerful, vulnerable and scary. And then to Nan Goldin's film *Sirens*, a homage to black supermodel Donyale Luna, who died from heroin use in 1979. Using footage by Kenneth Anger, Fellini and Antonioni, Warhol screen tests, clips of the Manson family and a rave in London, Goldin takes us into a dangerous, languorous dream world, to a beautiful score by [Mica Levi](#).

Non-binary artist P Staff plunges us into a mirrored room bathed in nasty yellow light, where solarised, degraded and warped footage shows abattoir scenes including a live pig kicked along a corridor. Throughout, Alemani stops us flagging, although there are, as ever, longueurs and periods of trudge, with a certain overload of cyborgs and references to the post-human, as well as too many whimsical paintings. But *The Milk of Dreams* remains timely, picking up on shared preoccupations from pandemics to natural destruction. And, as much as Alemani's biennale appears as a response to crisis, there is hope and humour here, too.

The part of the show that's in the Giardini opens with Katharina Fritsch's huge 1987 cast of an elephant, surrounded by its reflection in the mirrors on the walls. If there is always an elephant in the room, Fritsch's is doubled and redoubled, multiplied endlessly as a phantom herd of the stoic and patient and wise. Fritsch's hand-knitted minimal abstractions surround Romanian Andra Ursuța's translucent fused glass casts of body parts, bottles, junk, delicious sci-fi forms recalling movie monsters from *Alien* and *Predator*. Morphing bodies, the dumb, the beautiful and the fantastical recur.

Animatronic robotic mechanisms and prosthetic body parts perform clumsy interactions with their maker. Tishan Hsu regards herself as a cyborg and her agglomerative works seem to morph the human body with the mobile phone - whose oversized screens bulge into body parts, grow nipples and curdle into navels. Gigantic figures stalk through green light. Dogs ravage an



opulent house in Janis Rafa's film *Lacerate*. They paw at sumptuous still lives, gnaw at dead birds and sniff at a man whose blood puddles on to the floor from a wound in his neck.



📷 'So many bits of bodies' ... Können und Müssen (2022), Psychogräfin (2022) by Raphaella Vogel in the Arsenale main exhibition. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Along the way, we pass huge heads, paper flowers, globular glass glands containing traces of melanin, testosterone and oestrogen. Sculptural machines ooze mysterious liquids. Things sag and leak and drizzle. Insect-like sculptures bulge with drooping silicon sacs. So many prone and abject figures, bits of bodies, limbs, wounds, bodies reduced to prone arrangements of tentacles or concrete jumpsuits. Marguerite Humeau's abstract sculptures sweep and swoon and swerve in futuristic winds, performing an ecstatic dance, their forms made from metal, polyurethane, plastic ocean waste and algae. Little is what it seems.

Over at the entrance to the Arsenale, we are greeted by Simone Leigh's *Brick House*, a monumental bust of a black woman emerging from a sculpted domed cylinder reminiscent of an earthen dwelling from Chad or Cameroon. Part vessel, part building, it towers over us before we embark on the half-kilometre walk through a medieval rope factory. Another of Leigh's sculptures appears in the garden, this time gilded in gold.

Leigh's sculptures, which also occupy the US pavilion, constantly play between highly crafted ceramics and references to a racist past. Impressive as *Sonia Boyce's British pavilion show* is, I was just as moved by the resilience, wit and passion of French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira in the nearby French enclosure. A neighbour and friend of Boyce's in Brixton, Sedira celebrates communality, a life lived, engagements with politics and music, film and family and friends.

She has transformed the front of the pavilion into a bar. A woman sits at a

table. A man stands idly by. Suddenly music strikes up and they tango. At one point, the woman fixes her lipstick in an imaginary mirror, inches from my face. What Sedira gives us are her habitats, including a room filled with reels of her films and cinematography paraphernalia, as well as a model stage set of her home. There's also a cinema where she narrates scenes from her life and re-enacts movies she has loved. There's a great sense of the porousness between the real and the imaginary, the present and the remembered. In another rear room, a plain coffin sits on a trestle, the lid not yet nailed down.



📷 A life lived ... Dreams Have No Titles by Zineb Sedira, in the French pavilion. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

The sense of play in Sedira's work continues in Francis Alj's Belgian pavilion, where he shows films of kids from all around the world playing games: clapping at hovering clouds of mosquitoes, holding races with complicated rules between live snails painted different colours, dodging the traffic and the trams in Hong Kong, rolling a big truck tyre up a vast slag heap in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, only to roll back down while wedged inside it - a game so Sisyphian, arduous and dangerous, you wonder that the kids dare play it at all. We also forget play at our peril, and kids as much as artists make sense of the world through creative interaction.

Austria and Brazil were playful too, but some other pavilions are just hard work. Maria Eichhorn has had the foundations of the German pavilion excavated and plaster removed from the walls to reveal the joins between the original 1909 Bavarian pavilion and the Nazi-built 1938 extension. She has also published a companion to the guided tours that commemorate anti-fascist resistance in Venice during the German occupation, and the deportation and murder of Venice's Jews. Eichhorn's work can't fail to remind us of Hans Haacke's 1993 [Germania](#), in which he tore up the pavilion floor with jack-hammers.

Spanish artist Ignasi Aballí has "corrected" the Spanish pavilion by adding new walls at a 10-degree angle to the original structure, to effectively - or rather, to ineffectually - realign the structure. In the Danish pavilion, a

hanged male centaur dangles while his female companion gives birth on the floor. Some games really aren't worth playing.

But others really are. The Polish pavilion is one of the biennale's highlights, its walls covered in Polish-Romani artist Malgorzata Mirga-Tas's *Re-Enchanting the World*, a long series of textile images derived from the cycle of Renaissance frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. Cycles of images and signs follow both the calendar year and the historical migrations of the Roma people, re-appropriating the 17th-century prints of Jacques Callot, with their racist subtexts. Mirga-Tas reinvents these as patchwork scenes from everyday Roma life, collaging fabrics gathered from the Roma settlement in Poland where she lives. These tripartite images also include astrological symbols and signs from the Tarot, covering the walls in an epic of symbolism and history. The whole thing is glorious.



📷 Invitation of the Soft Machine and Her Angry Body Parts by Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl, in the Austrian pavilion. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Two large screens face one another in a cavernous 16th-century salt warehouse on Dorsoduro, where grime artists Lady Sanity and TrueMendous, filmed in Tottenham, face off Egyptian rappers Joker and Raptor, performing in Cairo. Able to hear one another by phone, they feed off each other's rhythms, breaks and lines, even though the two camps can't understand one another. It's a rapid tumble of wordplay, bitterness and anger, but what gets you most is its energy, drive and pulse, reporting back the emotional weather of both cities.

This is all part of Canadian artist Stan Douglas's presentation, which continues with a series of photographs in the Giardini. Meticulously staged shots of riots in Tottenham following the police shooting of Mark Duggan in 2011, protests in Tunis and in New York during Occupy Wall Street in the same year, continue the theme. This is the best work by Douglas I have seen.

Documentary also informs the New Zealand pavilion's Paradise Camp, a suite of tableau photographs and a "talk show" in which Samoa's Fa'afafine, the culture's traditional "third gender", comment on and deconstruct the



paintings of Paul Gauguin, which are also re-enacted in photographs, in a thoughtful show conceived by Japanese-Samoan artist Yuki Kihara.

The social becomes the personal in *You Are Another Me: A Cathedral of the Body* by Romanian film-maker and researcher Adina Pintilie. Complex multi-screen interviews and conversations between partners - a gay couple, a disabled activist and his lover, a transgender activist and sex worker - are seen close up as they talk, touch and reflect on their bodies, relationships, lives and needs. Moving between screens, we get uncomfortably close. Sometimes I felt voyeuristic, aware of the discomfort of others, focusing as much on other visitors as on the participants themselves. I wondered whether a biennale such as Venice, where much of the audience wanders in and out, is the right setting for these intimate and occasionally harrowing encounters. Nevertheless, I was touched and grateful for the participants' willingness to expose their inner selves to Pintilie, who has worked with them over several years.



📷 The social becomes the personal ... *You Are Another Me: A Cathedral of the Body* by Adina Pintilie. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Another kind of intimacy informs Marlene Dumas's *Open-End*, a large survey of her paintings at the Palazzo Grassi. Again, bodies are to the fore. Sometimes, paintings can say as much about human relationships as any amount of film footage or introspection. It is all a conundrum, as we beat ourselves at the boundaries between our inner selves, which we barely know, and the world of things and others outside ourselves. The mystery of consciousness is barely explained.

“How do we know we are not zombies?” asks one participant in *Human Brains: It Begins With an Idea*, in a vast exhibition at the Fondazione Prada. The answer is: “We don’t.” Artist Taryn Simon and curator Udo Kittelmann have staged hours of monologue and discussion among scientists, neurologists and thinkers. Filled with artefacts, scrolls, models, documents, paintings, anatomical studies, drawings of neurons and speculations on the seat of the soul, as well as voiceovers by numerous fiction writers, the exhibition attempts an understanding of how the brain works and how we think and feel.



We go from ancient Sumerian cuneiform texts to brain scans, model operating theatres and the machinery of electro-convulsive therapy. Gruesome, informative, speculative and historical, Human Brains could keep you enthralled for days. It is as much about what we don't know about consciousness as what we do. After all that looking and talking, being engrossed and being repelled by the biennale, it is a fitting counterpoint to our enduring ignorance.

The [Venice Biennale](#) runs until 27 November.

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