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The Observer

59th Venice Biennale review – the women’s biennale

In a seismic year, female artists take centre stage, while a timid institutional response leaves Ukraine to valiantly fend for itself



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Sun 24 Apr 2022 13.00 BST

It’s the most momentous biennale in living memory. I have never seen anything like it. This has nothing to do with the war, of which more later, though the Russian pavilion is closed and the borscht-coloured super-yachts all duly banished. Nor is it to do with the year-long delay caused by a pandemic that has no visible reflection whatsoever in the many thousands of works of art: nor is it even to do with the art itself.

Or art, how is it even to do with the art rock?

Rather, it is an epochal shift in attitudes. For the very first time, there are many more women than men, everywhere from the Giardini to the Arsenale and specifically in the main group exhibition that takes place in both. A whole cast who have been waiting in the wings for far too long are now playing front of stage. The 59th edition will go down in history as the women’s biennale.

Already, the wildfire hit is Algerian-born artist Zineb Sedira in the [French pavilion](#) in the Giardini. Her show is a living enchantment. You enter straight into a seductive performance: a couple in evening dress sashaying to a swooning accordion in a Parisian bar that looks like a period film set. As indeed it is, along with the other walk-in sets around it - living rooms in 50s Algiers, 60s Paris and 80s London - all of which reappear on the screen of an old-fashioned arthouse cinema at the back of the pavilion.





📷 'A living enchantment': Dreams Have No Titles by Zineb Sedira. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Here, Sedira is showing a film that weaves her family story into postcolonial history using the medium of cinema itself in the most captivating ways. You seem to be watching a clip from Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 black-and-white masterpiece *The Battle of Algiers*, for instance, except that the scene is mysteriously in colour: is this a living actor playing the role now? Whose film is which? A hand reaches into a scene and rearranges the room before your very eyes. Sedira herself appears, somehow actually there among Algerians arriving in 50s France, before she was even born, along with friends and family. She uses the seamless flow of film to question what is real and what is fiction, in history as in cinema. And it all dances along with such elegance and complexity, like Sedira herself, still shimmying against the final credits.

One of her characters is none other than Sonia Boyce, the first black woman to represent Britain in the pavilion next door. Her work is even more collaborative, an enthralling female polyphony involving five singers, including the wondrous Tanita Tikaram and Jacqui Dankworth, feeling their way through a musical improvisation on separate screens. They cannot see each other, as we can, and yet their voices twine, adjust, attune to each other no matter how distinct. Running all the way from blues to folk, pop and jazz, humming and hymning, low and guttural, high and tremulous, they somehow head in the same direction. Boyce’s golden 3D sculptures become seats for listeners and plinths for a trove of discount albums by black female

artists from Shirley Bassey to Beverley Knight onwards. The whole installation is like a jam session for the dream bands of black history.





📷 Feeling Her Way by artist Sonia Boyce. Photograph: Action Press/Rex/Shutterstock

Like Boyce, Simone Leigh is the first black woman to represent her country in the US pavilion, which she has thatched to look like a traditional west African building. A female figure with a concave disc for a head towers over the forecourt: 24ft of black bronze. Leigh’s outsize sculptures make their point in black and white - a white woman in a porcelain crinoline, easily shattered; a black slave stooping over the washing, cast in enduring bronze. The best of her works, such as the monumental bell-shaped figure titled Brick House, stonewall the viewer with their sheer material force.

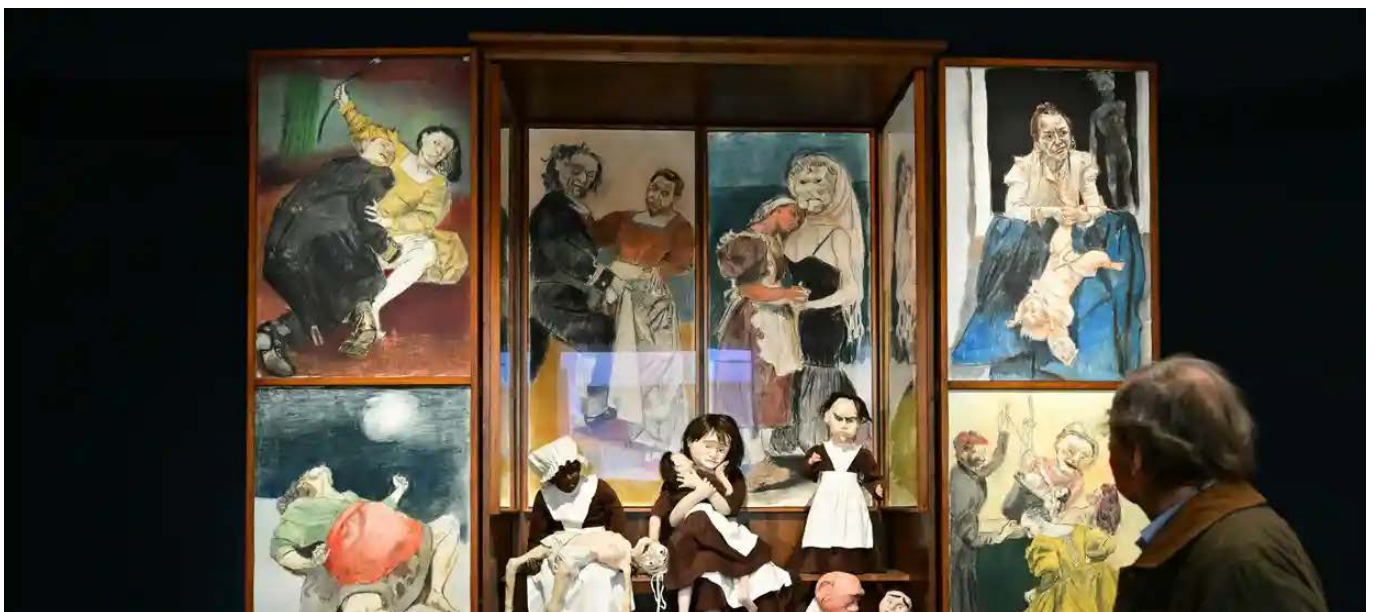




📷 Cupboard (2022) by Simone Leigh. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

This year’s big group show, *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani, takes its title from a fairytale by the British-born Leonora Carrington, who is at the heart of an intensely intimate and eerie mini-survey of female surrealists to rival the huge surrealism blockbuster at the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Dorsoduro. There are “capsules” such as this throughout, some historic and even scholarly - from outsider art to cyborgs and mannequins - and much of the work, in this context, seems like late-flowering surrealism.

Of the 213 artists, only 21 are men, which represents a complete reversal. More striking still is the novelty of walking through half a mile of art with scarcely a single male body in sight. The triumph, by general consent, is a magnificent presentation of paintings and stuffed figures by Paula Rego, their climax an altarpiece of old cabinets filled with women from literature and folklore who have fallen from grace. Some are grown up but still wearing their Foundling hospital uniforms, one clutching a foundling of her own. Society will never let them be free of their past.





📷 A visitor views Oratorio, 2009 by Paula Rego. Photograph: Vincenzo Pinto/AFP/Getty Images

Stitching, weaving, knotting, tapestry - threads of all sorts run through this biennale, from the immensely delicate hanging gardens of the venerable Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña to the dazzling op-art carpets of a resurgent Kosovo in its pavilion. Most stupendous is the colossal frieze running all the way round the Polish pavilion (including trompe l’oeil pillars) made entirely in appliqué by the young Romani-Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas with her three co-workers.

Based on Renaissance frescoes in Ferrara, this takes the form of a three-tier narrative: the history of Poland running round the top, above a zodiac cycle of golden sheep and twinkling crabs, complete with images of Polish heroines; below them a sequence of everyday tableaux: women meeting, singing, drinking coffee, out in the fields gathering potatoes (the plastic baskets ingeniously conceived), from birth to old age and death. It is a vision of generosity and humour - characters wittily depicted in the very fabrics they might wear in life - requiring great aesthetic dexterity to convey everything from gently falling leaves to deep sorrow in fragments of cloth. Only consider that four Polish women created all this from scratch in five short months while Germany came up with nothing, literally - the floor up, the brickwork exposed, the pavilion empty while yet another artist “rediscovers” its past. It is almost impossible to ignore the geopolitical analogy.

Of course, the pavilions were commissioned before the war, art is not a tool and so forth. But the spectacle in Venice is of Ukraine valiantly fending for itself. The artists and curator of the Russian pavilion resigned at the war’s outset, so that the biennale never had to make the moral decision to close it (one of its contracted “producers”, not incidentally, is Sergei Lavrov’s daughter). But speculation about the value of soft diplomacy - or Russian art money - doesn’t begin to explain the timidity of institutional response. The biennale eventually offered Ukraine a small lawn in the Giardini as a temporary pavilion two weeks ago, where its artists have raised a monument of sandbags, and art will be spontaneously produced until November. But where is the massive banner that ought to be visible from St Mark’s Square to the Lido? I’ve seen more Ukrainian flags in my corner of south London.





📷 Lesia Khomenko's *Max Is in the Army*, 2022, at PinchukArtCentre in Venice. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

The official pavilion is no more than a wall between Kosovo and Turkey in the Arsenale. But even in such cramped conditions, Pavlo Makov’s “fountain” of 78 bronze funnels, through which water gradually dwindles to meagre drips, has a profound and melancholy beauty. It was originally conceived in 1995, but nobody looking at it now could fail to think of Ukrainians dying of dehydration in Mariupol.

This Is Ukraine: Defending Our Freedom is a collateral event, offsite in Cannaregio, backed by the Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk. Stationed at intervals through the Renaissance building are Lesia Khomenko’s larger-than-life paintings of civilians in

ordinary clothes holding a gun in one hand and saluting with the other. *Max Is in the Army*, 2022, is the title of the series. Max, an artist too, is Khomenko’s husband.





📷 'Glorious': Children's Game #26 by Francis Alÿs. Photograph: © Francis Alÿs

There is strength and consolation everywhere, if you look: in [Malta's marvellous raindrops of fire](#) lightening the darkness in tribute to Caravaggio, in [the inaugural Cameroonian pavilion](#) with its photographs of women bursting from monochrome into full colour, in the [hilarious New Zealand pavilion](#), where a Polynesian artist sends up Gauguin in a TV talkshow. Above all in Francis Alÿs's glorious films in the [Belgium pavilion](#). *Children's Games* - an ongoing tribute to Bruegel, Alÿs's compatriot - features snail racing, hide and seek, competitive skipping, elaborate matches involving nothing more than pebbles and holes in the sand. And all of it, all this rising joy, this gleeful improvisation, is played out in the ruins of poverty and war all over the world.

[The 57th Venice Biennale continues until 27 November](#)

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