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Venice Biennale 2022

Review

Ben Luke

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

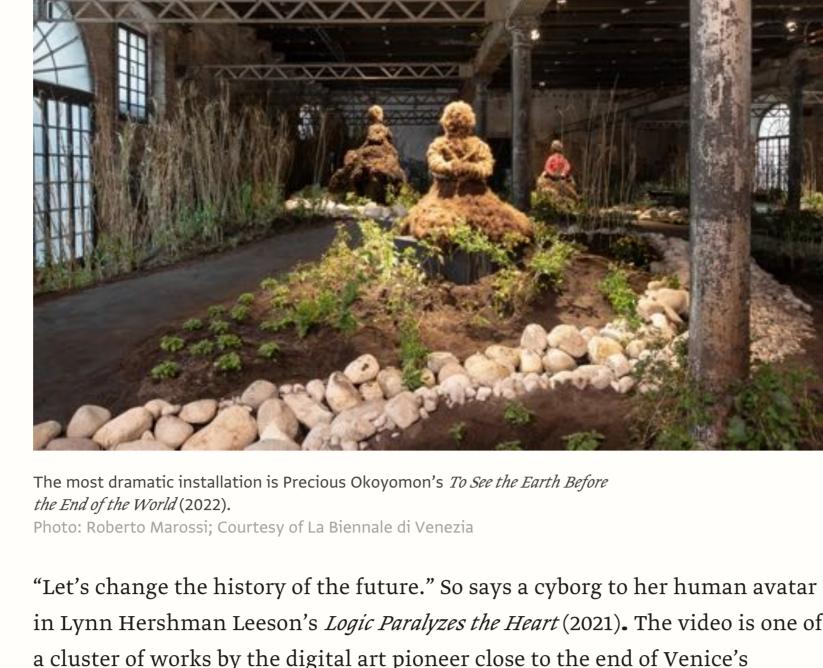
> The stuff of dreams: Cecilia Alemani delivers a perfectly judged Biennale The Milk of Dreams is a "show of ripples and resonances, one that honours its artists"

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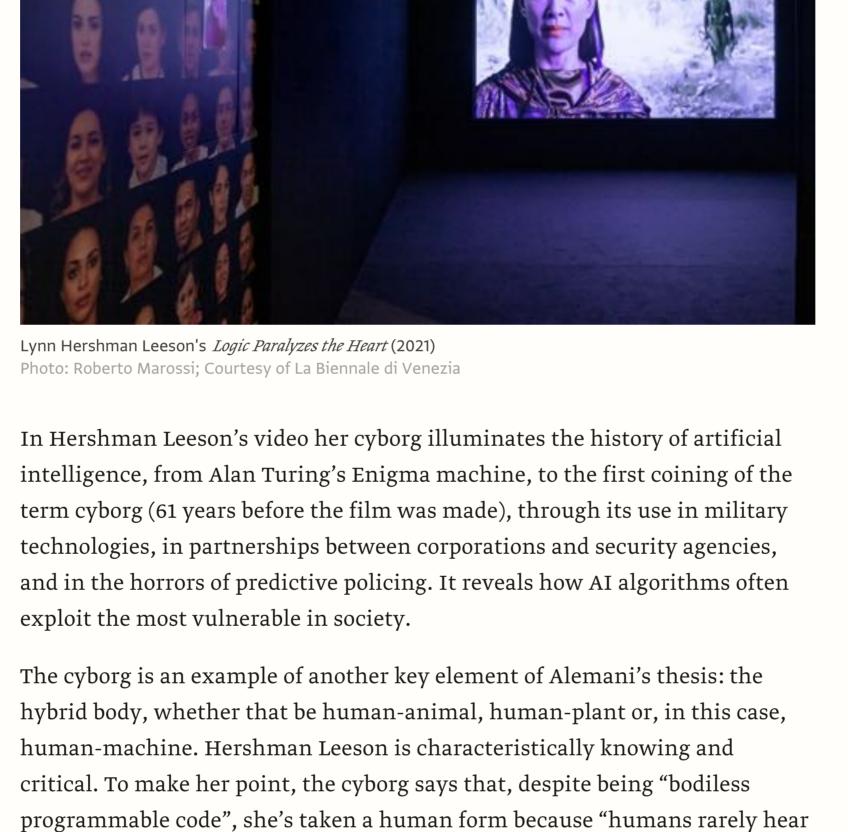




in Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* (2021). The video is one of a cluster of works by the digital art pioneer close to the end of Venice's Arsenale, as *The Milk of Dreams*—Cecilia Alemani's rich and often thrilling

Biennale show—reaches its conclusion. It is a time-warping exhibition, where temporal states are uncertain, in flux; a material for artists to shape and manipulate, as they do with everything from crystal to coffee, bottles and bedsprings, porcelain and paint—lots of paint—in the show. It is also profoundly topical; while activism and protest are not dominant, it is unequivocally concerned with the Anthropocene and its effects. It confronts, among much else, the idea that we must imagine a postanthropocentric and even post-human future, and ponders the attitudes and behaviours that have led us to where we are—many of the artists Alemani has chosen are doing so in extraordinarily imaginative ways. It is deeply

connected to speculative fiction in this sense, with the writers Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler as looming presences.



whose work corresponds visually with them.

of our present ecological crisis. Also at the heart of that malaise is the void between algorithms' logic, their basis in rationality, and human feelings and imagination. It's a plea for technologies and humans to cohabit, to adopt a more empathetic balance. Hence Hershman Leeson's title, Logic Paralyses the Heart, and the cyborg's request to her avatar—and by extension to us, her audience—that we teach her how to dream. **Capsule collections** Hybrid bodies, critiques of the rational and surrendering to the world of

dreams are all, of course, at the heart of the Surrealist imagination. In taking

the title for her show from Leonora Carrington's children's story, Alemani

made the link to the 20th-century movement explicit from the start. In The

Witch's Cradle, the first of five historic "time capsules" which act as seedbeds

for the contemporary works in the surrounding rooms—three in the Giardini,

two in the Arsenale—she brings together women Surrealists, those who

shared some of the movement's ideas but operated outside it, and others

or see anything that doesn't look like them"—perhaps the fundamental cause

Capsule one: The Witch's Cradle Photo: Marco Cappelletti; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia It's important that all the Surrealist artists here are women—indeed, the time

capsules are exclusively the preserve of female artists—because Alemani

highlights that in the reimagined bodies, fluid identities and critiques of

authority they depict, there is often a break, too, with heteronormativity,

in tune with the contemporary art beyond the capsule. As the art historian

through re-enchantment", often adopting and reimagining the forms and

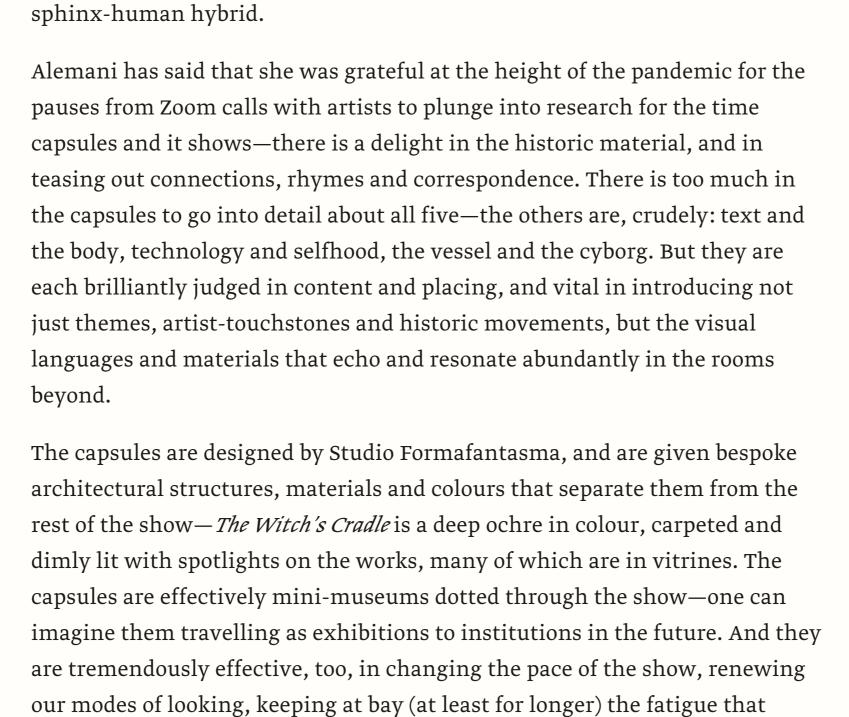
something that is rarer among male Surrealists. In this, the women are more

Alyce Mahon puts it in the catalogue, women Surrealists "aimed to re-educate

narratives of fairy tales. There are marvellous things in this vein by Remedios

Varo, Toyen, Dorothea Tanning and Leonor Fini—although it's a minor pity

that there are none of Fini's paintings where she imagines herself as a



biennials can so often prompt.

Katharina Fritsch's Elephant (1987)

Photo: Marco Cappelletti; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Space and pace

into a new context, Alemani creates additional significance: an elephant called Toni once occupied this very location in the city—it was known as "the prisoner of the Giardini".

Indeed, the pacing of the show as a whole is largely exemplary. Alemani

begins both the Giardini and the Arsenale with big set-pieces. Katharina

Fritsch's *Elephant* (1987) stands alone, majestic but unsettling in its deep

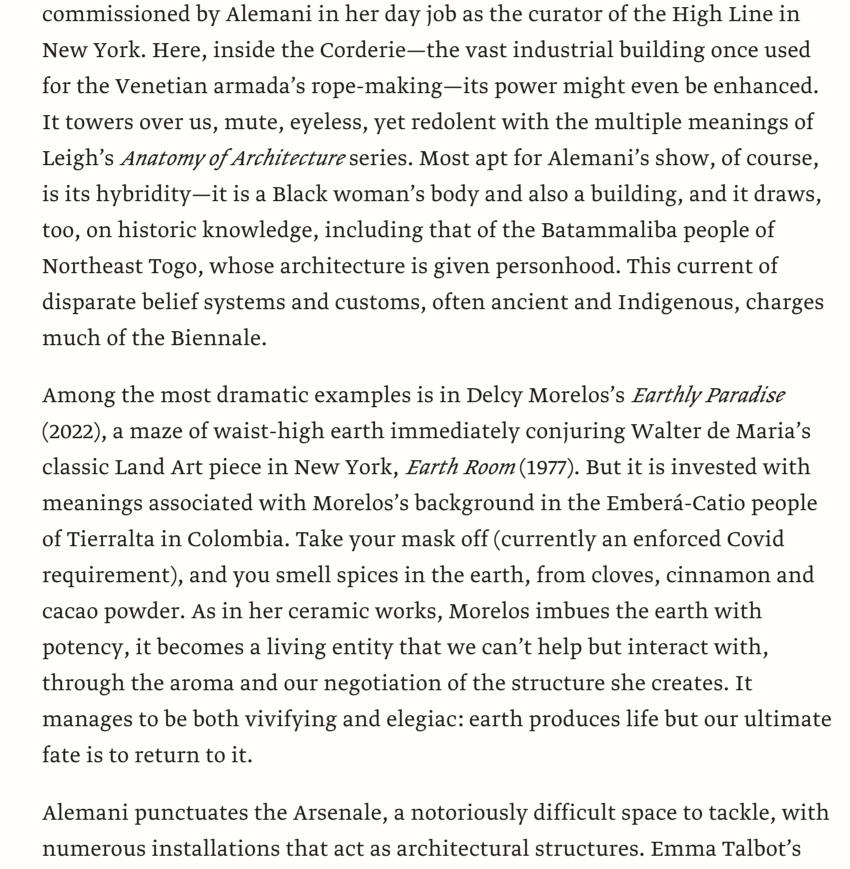
significance of the elephant is manifold: a matriarchal animal, it is an

it in that chromium oxide green shifts its presence from realism to the

greenness, surrounded by mirrors in which a spectral herd is created. The

emblem of a Biennale dominated by women artists; the simple act of casting

uncanny, to the territory of fairy tales. In bringing Fritsch's 35-year-old work



hanging curtain arcs around two of the Corderie's pillars, featuring a teeming

tableau of figures and handwritten text alluding to the climate emergency

and its anthropocentric causes: "Why do we think we can outwit nature?",

she asks. It's an extraordinary piece, reminiscent of William Blake at his

most elemental and visionary, and full of foreboding and anxiety.

Opening the Arsenale is Simone Leigh's *Brick House* (2019), originally

Kapwani Kiwanga's series of fabrice works Sunset Horizon (2022) and Hour glass series (2022) Photo: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia The Chilean artist Sandra Vásquez de la Horra and Canadian Kapwani Kiwanga also create notable interruptions in the space. Vásquez de la Horra's custom-built wooden structure is filled with her drawings, including folded

objects featuring bodies that double as mountain ranges (again, Indigenous

knowledges are an influence). Kiwanga has created floor-to-ceiling paintings

on diaphanous fabric, each called *Sunset Horizon* (2022) and evoking luminous

desert skies, alongside enigmatic geometric glass sculptures filled with sand

and seem immovable, suggesting that time has run out, and while the fabric

that is a by-product of fracking. The glass pieces are called *Hour glass* (2022)

paintings might be beautiful they have a similarly grave symbolism for a

Perhaps the most dramatic installation anywhere in Alemani's show, also

the World (2022). In a room all to itself, and within a booming abstract

rich with symbolism, is Precious Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of

soundtrack, it is a landscape occupied by black water pools, stones, pathways

plant originally brought to the US to revitalise soil whose nutrients had been

sapped through the over-production of cotton. But it took over, and became

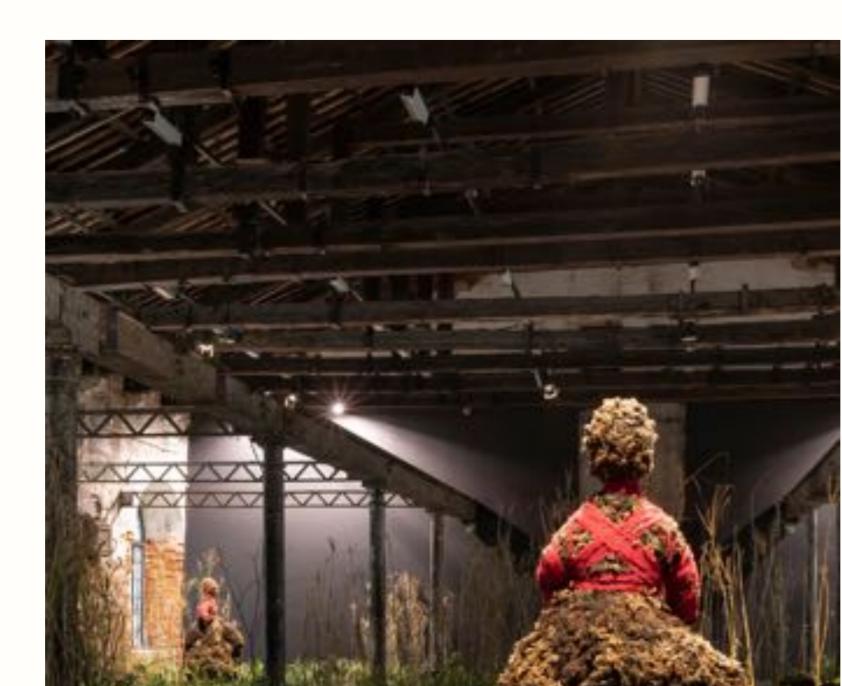
devastatingly invasive—over the course of the Biennale, Okoyomon's kudzu

will also grow uncontrollably, and reclaim the installation for itself.

and plants—most notably, sugar cane and kudzu. The latter is a Japanese

heating planet at the mercy of extractive practices.

Making connections



figures.

Precious Okoyomon's To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2022).

Of course, both the sugar cane and the kudzu are vegetal metaphors for

humans: enslaved peoples, displaced peoples, and their deep connection with

land and landscape. Appearing to rise from the plant beds are life-size figures

in raw wool, yarn and blood and dirt, calling to mind ancient sculptures. As

much as it is a meditation on past horrors, Okoyomon's landscape is a site of

potential, as they see it. Note that their title says before the end of the world;

with that in mind, their totemic figures adopt a certain revolutionary power.

relatively small but largely judicious selection of video works. Ali Cherri's Of

Men and Gods and Mud(2022) is a three-screen installation in the Arsenale,

with documentary footage of brick-making in Sudan and a narration that

conjures myths and the inextricable connection between the earth, people

and belief systems. Nan Goldin's Sirens (2019-20) is the pick of the videos in

the Giardini—Goldin reflects on the story of Donyale Luna, the Black model

and actress who died young of a heroin overdose, through a delirious yet

mournful mashup of found footage of Luna and other dreamily intoxicated

Beyond sculptural installation, I think Alemani was right to include a

Photo: Roberto Marossi; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia

Mrinalini Mukherjee's hemp figures Photo: Marco Cappelletti; Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia Alemani shows a profound understanding of the limits and possibilities of her two sites: the Arsenale more polyphonic between big set-pieces and the Giardini as the zone for stimulating pairings and trios. The late Indian artist Mrininalini Mukherjee's hemp figures, the post-Surrealist paintings and flotsam-and-jetsam sculptures by Cecilia Vicuña and the landscape-figuremicrobiological paintings of Merikokeb Berhanu is one of many stand-out groupings. Another set brings together the ever-impressive morphing figurations of Christina Quarles, the tallon-and-membrane spookiness of

Hannah Levy's sculptures, and the hugely moving final works of Kaari Upson,

who died last year. Her 3D modelled relief portraits (perhaps self-portraits?)

Quietly, there is a survey across the Giardini of seriously playful painters of

are covered in fields of urethane, resins and pigments, so that the facial

image either lurks behind the veils of colour or appears to retreat into

the same generation who seemed to unearth new depths in their medium, and continue to today—Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl and Jacqueline Humphries all show hugely impressive works. Allison Katz, who was taught by both Sillman and Von Heyl, mines her own furrow with great humour, precision and mystery in five paintings (with knowing nods to Venetian themes) in the Arsenale. The sheer coherence of Alemani's show is evident in the way that the works talk to each other not just in the same room, or between the capsules and the contemporary spaces, but between the Giardini and Arsenale. It is a show of ripples and resonances, one that honours its artists by letting them dictate its paths, while providing a perfectly judged structure to allow their thoughts to

Venice Biennale

percolate, and their imaginations to soar.

Sonia Boyce's British pavilion wins Venice Biennale's coveted Golden Lion for best national exhibition Simone Leigh, Zineb Sedira and Ali Cherri also receive awards **Gareth Harris**

Venice Biennale 2022

nothingness.



curator Cecilia Alemani

year's Venice Biennale

reveals her plans for this

The exhibition will include "gender

non-conforming artists who are

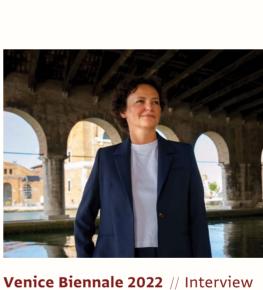
challenging the figure of man as

Exhibitions

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Gareth Harris

centre of the universe"



A world of possibility: Cecilia

Alemani, the curator of the

2022 Venice Biennale,

The Italian curator, who has

thinking behind her female-

organised exhibitions and events throughout the world, reveals the

dominated exhibition The Milk of

discusses the show

Dreams **Ben Luke**



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