

SHAO-PIN LUO

## THE VENICE BIENNALE

“WRITTEN BY WATER” features an immense sloping surface covered with a thousand notebooks, whose pages are ruffled and crinkled as if to create the effect of rolling waves rushing towards the viewer. This is the work of Portuguese-Luxembourgish artist Marco Godinho, who dipped the notebooks in water at various locations around the Mediterranean Sea. His description reads: “Spectators dive into a liquid world of imagination, reflection, and contemplation that encourages them to project their own histories onto a multilayered canvas of constantly changing, seemingly inexhaustible impressions.” One is reminded of another history, inscribed in *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Michael Ondaatje’s novel about the brutal civil war in Sri Lanka, in which the ancient stone book at Polonnaruwa is immersed in monsoon water “so that, depending on tide and pull of the moon, the words in the rock would submerge or hang above their reflection or be revealed in both elements.” That is precisely the effect this artwork seems to evoke, as it suggests that writing and history are as ephemeral and eternal as water.

An exhilarating artwork that is visually interesting and profoundly moving, “Written by Water” represents the best of the 58th International Art Exhibition in Venice—a biannual exhibition that is more commonly known as the Venice Biennale. Inaugurated by the Venetian City Council in 1895, it features a vast and diverse display of paintings, sculptures, video installations, and performance pieces from around the world, and it is widely considered the most prestigious event of its kind. The director of this year’s exhibition is Ralph Rugoff, the American-born director of London’s Hayward Gallery, who chose the theme “May You Live in Interesting Times.” Rugoff explained that the selected works “reflect upon precarious aspects of existence today, including different threats to key traditions, institutions and relationships,” and that they show how “art can be a kind of guide for how to live and think in ‘interesting times.’”

One could certainly quibble with the banal title, which refers to a phrase



Marco Godinho, "Written by Water" (2019)

Photograph © Shao-Pin Luo

used to describe the rise of fascism in the 1930s by British politician Sir Austen Chamberlain, who wrongly claimed that it was a Chinese curse (there is no equivalent in Chinese). The promotional brochure also notes that the artworks explore how “everything connects with everything else,” which again hardly says very much. If one were as cynical as Jeff, the art critic in Geoff Dyer’s novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (2005), which is partly set at the Venice Biennale, one might surmise that the whole affair is just an occasion for art critics, curators, and dealers to get together and get drunk. Still, one sympathizes with the difficulty of describing an exhibition of this size, as there are 79 official participants, who contributed pieces for the exhibition’s two main locations, and countless unofficial participants, who contributed pieces for the satellite pavilions scattered throughout the city. The works address a wide range of contemporary concerns, including environmental issues, political turmoil, and mass migration. The exhibition thus unsurprisingly includes both the bold and the visionary, the provocative and the contemplative, the serious and the playful, the humongous and the miniscule, perhaps alternately inspiring and disturbing all.

Some of the works have been breathlessly praised, such as Lithuanian filmmaker Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, writer Vaiva Grainytė, and composer Lina Lapelytė’s opera *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, which features a cast of twenty people singing live on an artificial beach as a sort of environmental elegy (it won the Golden Lion for best national presentation), and Mexican artist Teresa Margolles’ installation “La Búsqueda” (The Search), which features three glass panels from Ciudad Juárez that are covered with torn posters for missing girls. Some have also been accused of poor taste, such as Swiss artist Christoph Büchel’s disturbing installation “Barca Nostro” (Our Boat), which features the rusty fishing boat that sank off Lampedusa in 2015 with more than 800 migrants aboard (one reviewer said that “contemplating its force as an art work feels indecent,” and another described its placement next to a café as “an appalling conjunction”). Others have been mercilessly mocked, such as Chinese artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s installation “Can’t Help Myself,” which features a giant rotating robotic arm trapped inside a large glass enclosure continuously and futilely sweeping oozing red liquid back and forth across a white floor (one reviewer described it as “grotesque,” and another wondered whether artists would eventually be replaced by robots).

Most agree, however, that the contributions from first-time participants Madagascar and Ghana are particularly strong. For example, Mala-



Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, "Can't Help Myself" (2019)

Photograph © Shao-Pin Luo

gasy artist Joël Andrianomearisoa’s enigmatic piece “I Have Forgotten the Night” consists of a forest of funereal black tissue paper hanging from rafters. Described poetically as a “night of torn papers of love and death,” this dark labyrinth could represent a palace of passions or a mysterious tomb of memories. The Ghanaian Pavilion also features a large installation by El Anatsui and Ibrahim Mahama, a film sculpture by Selasi Awusi Sosu, paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, black-and-white portraits from the 1960s by Felicia Abban (Ghana’s first professional female photographer), and John Akomfrah’s mesmerising and moving three-channel film “The Elephant in the Room—Four Nocturnes,” which juxtaposes images of elemental forces and the haunting expressions of migrants walking across endless deserts.

An extraordinarily haunting work, which is somewhat obscured by the flashier objects surrounding it in the main exhibition space, is German artist Alexandra Bircken’s visceral installation “Eskalation,” in which forty figures made from calico dipped in black latex are suspended from or draped over ladders that extend to the ceiling. These hanging, drooping, and faceless figures evoke such pity and pathos that one is tempted to reach out and release them from their despairing misery. There are also wonderful photographs, such as Indian photographer Soham Gupta’s series of empathetic and expressive nocturnal portraits of those living on the margins of Kolkata, which reveal moments of suffering and loneliness as well as joy and spontaneity. As well, there are moving and intriguing sound installations, such as Indian artist Shilpa Gupta’s “For, in Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit,” which confronts the violence of censorship through a symphony of recorded recitations in multiple languages of the verses of 100 poets imprisoned or persecuted for their work across history. The title is inspired by the work of the fourteenth-century Azerbaijani poet Imadaddin Nasimi, who was skinned alive for blasphemy. In the dimly lit room, a grid of 100 microphones suspended from the ceiling are reverse-wired to function as speakers, and each has its corresponding verse printed on paper, inviting the viewer/listener to participate in the chorus of disembodied voices. Another sound piece, “The Ground,” by the Lebanese artist and electroacoustic composer Tarek Atoui, fills an entire room with a garden of ribbed and smooth ceramic forms on which various instruments—a twig broom, a light metal chain—have been rigged to play delicate music. Bridging music and visual art, Atoui creates interesting sounds in complex contexts.

While Canada has been an official participant since 1952, this year’s ex-

hibition includes the first presentation of Inuit art in the Canadian pavilion, which features a selection of films by the Isuma collective. Led by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, Isuma seeks to preserve Inuit culture and language and to present stories of colonial-settler relations from an Inuit perspective. The main exhibition space also features several works by Vancouver-based artist Stan Douglas, including the series “Blackout,” which tells the story of a New York City blackout that never actually occurred, and “Doppelgänger,” a two-channel video installation about a female astronaut who is mysteriously cloned. As well, Montreal-based artist Jon Rafman presents the 3D computer animation “Dream Journal,” which features a fantasy world inhabited by strange hybrid creatures (conceived “through a combination of lucid dreaming and automatic writing”). Unlike the works by Isuma, which emphasize the importance of preserving cultural heritage, Rafman’s work thus illustrates the degree to which contemporary popular culture has colonized the unconscious mind.

Outside the main exhibition space, the European Cultural Centre also presents a series of works in two sumptuous palaces—Palazzo Bembo and Palazzo Mora—along with a gigantic outdoor sculpture display that prominently features, among others, hyperrealist works by the American sculptor Carole A. Feuerman. Of the dazzlingly rich array of art pieces displayed in these palaces, particularly remarkable is Israeli artist Ariela Wertheimer’s “Skin,” which features large photographs of the texture of boats before, during, and after the scraping of barnacles has exposed the lower layers of coating. Juxtaposed with the colourful expressive paintings by Lea Nikel, they form a “lyrical abstraction”—a key term in Israeli art that originated in the 1940s and 1950s. Another notable piece is Czech multimedia artist Daniel Pešta’s dramatic video “The Chain,” which deals with the peculiar practices of secret societies by depicting a group of men sitting around a table and setting fire to their hands. The British ceramicist Edmund de Waal, author of the acclaimed memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), also presents the piece “Psalm” both in the Jewish Museum’s historic Ghetto Nuovo and beneath a ceiling of frescos of the Ateneo Veneto. Contemplative and mournful, this work contains elegant arrangements of delicate and minuscule white-glazed vessels and porcelain chards and rectangles of polished white marble and alabaster that create quiet memorials to exiles, poets, and lost libraries. Heinrich Heine’s words are inscribed here: “Where they burn books, there they will, in the end, burn people.”

One needs to keep in mind that this feast of multimedia art also includes festivals of contemporary dance, music, architecture, cinema, and theatre. For example, the 47th International Theatre Festival opened with Dutch director Jetse Batelaan's award-winning children's plays *War* (2017) and *The Story of the Story* (2018), which addresses the human need for meaning and relevance in telling and being part of stories through religion, philosophy, and now social media. As well, the festival includes two plays by German playwright Heiner Müller: Croatian director Oliver Frlić's production of *Mauser* (1970) and German director Sebastian Nübling's production of *Hamletmachine* (1977). *Mauser* is considered to be a response to German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *The Measures Taken* (1930), as it problematizes the idea that collective action is more important than individual action by showing how the nullification of the individual results in an endless and self-perpetuating cycle of violence. In Frlić's radical and energetic production, five actors play the two characters, A and B, as well as the chorus that forms the military court charged with upholding the revolution. The provocative staging of striking colours and tortuous, writhing bodies stripped completely naked powerfully demonstrates both the enormous degradation and destruction wrought upon the human psyche and body by terror and brutality as well as the undiminished dignity and humanity that refuse to be annihilated. Accompanied by rhythmic minimalist electronic music, the play ends with the nude actors chopping wood, relentlessly yet monotonously, as if mimicking the actions of the revolution itself. In the discussion that followed the performance on the opening evening, the director explained that "our *Mauser* speaks about revolution that starts to eat its own children. It also asks: for what are we ready to kill and, even more, to die today?"

On my last day at the exhibition, as my vaporetto splashed towards the airport, looming into view was Italian artist Lorenzo Quinn's "Building Bridges"—a sculpture featuring six pairs of gigantic, gleaming white hands, enjoining as if in supplication towards the sky on the dockyards outside the exhibition space. As this work gradually receded on the horizon, it seemed unexpectedly but immensely moving and powerful against the radiant Venetian sun and sea. In the end, art, at its best, is an encounter with the difficult and the different, the strange and the interesting, which enlivens our senses and challenges the way we see and experience the world. While an art exhibition may not be the solution to all our woes, it can allow us to see them from a new perspective, and that at least is some small consolation.