

Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

CHIHARU SHIOTA

BLOUIN ARTINFO.COM, May 11, 2015

Review: What to See and What to Avoid at the Venice Biennale

BY MICHAEL PRODGER | MAY 10, 2015

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EVENTS

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ARTISTS

Kutlug Ataman

Adrian Ghenie

Tobias Zielony

Sarah Lucas

The numbers at the 56th Venice Biennale are as bewildering as some of the work on display. There were 86 countries initially participating (two dropped out – Kenya because its Italian curators favoured Chinese artists over Kenyans and Costa Rica which tried to charge its artists to take part), with 44 Collateral Events sanctioned by the Biennale curator [Okwui Enwezor](#), and 80 more dotted around Venice in Biennale-themed exhibitions.

The official displays (those not in the 84 national pavilions) feature 136 artists from 53 countries ranging from the USA and the European powerhouses to first-timers such as Mauritius and Mongolia. Such is the volume and variety of work on display that the truly conscientious visitor would need from now until the closing date in seven months time to assess each piece as the artists would like - Christian Boltanski's exhibit, for example, is a video that lasts a full 24 hours.

As an overview of what constitutes contemporary art the Biennale is unrivalled. As a measure of quality it is less reliable.

Two of the national pavilions to be avoided are [Germany's](#) (its centrepiece, a "documentary essay" by [Tobias Zielony](#) based on a Nigerian newspaper mines turgidity to its very depths) and Britain's ([Sarah Lucas's](#) casts of the naked lower halves of her women friends with cigarettes inserted in every orifice are outdated and crass). There are though plenty of others to make up for these and other lapses.

Head first for the Canadian pavilion where the BGL art collective humorously take visitors through a small-town convenience store into an area filled with artists' bric-a-brac and beautifully dripping paint tins before climbing up to a huge ad hoc game of Mousetrap. Here coins are rolled down Heath Robinson chutes to end up making patterns on a huge sheet of perspex. It is all wonderfully homemade and tongue in cheek.

The best paintings are to be found in the Romanian pavilion with "Darwin's Room," a hanging of [Adrian Ghenie's](#) pictures. Many of them take the form of Victorian portraits that have, to follow the theme, evolved under his brush. Ghenie uses an assortment of techniques within each picture – feathering, layering, exactitude, abstraction – so that the staid becomes vibrant and unpredictable.

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This is a Biennale heavy on political and social comment and among the most effective is Ivan Grubanov's "United Dead Nations" in the Serbian pavilion. During the Biennale's the 120-year lifespan numerous conglomerate nations – the USSR, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, the Austro-Hungarian empire et al – have broken up. Grubanov marks their dissolution with a simple legend of each nation's lifespan on the wall and a pile of trampled, dirty national flags piled beneath it. The mutability of nationhood is given a poignant twist given Serbia's own recent history.

Among the Collateral Events the Turkish artist [Kutlug Ataman](#)'s Portrait of Sakip Sabanci stands out (see main photo). Sabanci was a philanthropist and the work comprises a huge rippling sheet above the viewer's head made from 9,216 LED panels each showing a passport-size photograph of someone whose life he touched. Typical of Ataman's work, it is simultaneously mesmeric and moving.

Finally, the most poetically beautiful work is Chiharu Shiota's *The Key in the Hand* in the Japanese pavilion. An unimaginably complex skein of red threads dripping with thousands of old keys emerges from two wooden boats. The effect of walking under and through it – part rain, part mist – is magical and dreamlike and replete with possible meanings, as if one finds oneself in a three-dimensional illustration from a children's book.



As ever, this year's Biennale is a numbers game with the unmemorable being in greatest supply. There are though enough works of real quality – in their invention, wit, thoughtfulness and skill – to repay the footsore but diligent visitor. And there's always the Bellini and Titians in the Church of the Frari for those who need their minds unscrambling.

